

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE HEARING EYE





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
HEARING EYE**

An innovative device known as the 'Hearing Eye' is stolen from a quirky inventor, Winston Granville. He asks The Three Investigators to recover it for him but does not give them much details about the device. Jupiter, Pete and Bob travel to a remote town in the desert and manage to complete the task very quickly. However after that, they realize that a lot does not seem to be right with Winston and his brother, Matthew. There seems to be a mystery behind the device and the two strange brothers are hiding something...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Hearing Eye

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Die drei ???: Pfad der Angst

(The Three ???: Path of Fear)

by

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1. A Suspicious Character

“Uuuuuuh-huuuuuh babe you set my heart on fire...”

Pete Crenshaw pushed the lawnmower through the garden with verve, singing at the top of his lungs to the music in his headphones. It was scorching hot, he was sweating and had to work hard to move forward.

“... And I can’t stand the heat, can’t just stand by...”

Mowing the lawn was one of his domestic duties and he was even paid for it. But in the last three weeks, he had much rather gone surfing than supplementing his pocket money, and so the grass had grown almost ten centimetres high by now.

“... Uuuuuuh, I can’t stand this burning desire...”

But the mower now also left a nice, close-cropped trail, which made it clear that work had been done here.

“... So gimme gimme gimme muuuuuushroom piiiie—huaah!”

Something icy cold had slapped his back. Pete tore off his headphones, reached for the hit spot and felt cold wetness. Angrily he turned around and his gaze fell first on a wet flannel behind him on the grass. Then he looked towards the kitchen window where he saw his mother peering out. “Mum! What is this? Did you do this?”

“Who else?” said his mother. “I have called you five times in the last ten minutes. Now that you can finally hear me, I have a message for you—from Jupiter.”

Pete listened up. “Jupe? Did he call?”

“No, I just found this note in the letter box. I guess you were so busy he didn’t want to bother you.” Mrs Crenshaw handed her son the note to read:

Hello Pete,

Since yesterday, a suspicious character has been hanging around outside the salvage yard. Because of his appearance, his demeanour and his general obnoxiousness, I do not think it can be completely ruled out that he could be a relative of Skinny Norris—perhaps a cousin.

Aunt Mathilda sent me away with an assignment. Please come here and watch what the suspect is doing. If he enters the salvage yard, you know what to do.

*See you later,
Jupe*

Pete moaned. “Just what we needed—a cousin of Skinny Norris? Can I go over to Jupe’s?”

“What about the lawn?” his mother asked.

“I will finish it by this evening, I promise! I really have to go there! Who knows what that chap is up to while Jupe is away.”

Mrs Crenshaw pondered and then nodded. “All right. At least the whole neighbourhood won’t have to listen to you sing.”

“Thanks, Mum!” Pete ran to the shed, got out his bike and swung onto the saddle.

The Jones Salvage Yard was only a few streets away from Pete's house. When Pete turned the corner, he saw from a distance, a chubby figure with blonde hair standing in front of the open gate with a strange device in his hands. He was just taking a step forward.

"Hey!" yelled Pete. "Stop! Stop!"

The stranger turned around and Pete realized that it was a boy about his age. He saw a sweaty, chubby face under stringy blond hair that hadn't been cut or washed for a long time. On his lumpy nose, sat a huge pair of dark brown horn-rimmed glasses that had been out of fashion twenty years ago. The boy was wearing a checked lumberjack shirt, carelessly stuffed into an old brown corduroy trousers and stretched over his thick belly, and worn-out old shoes. The device in his hands looked like an old television antenna.

Pete brought his bike to a halt next to the stranger—and was almost knocked over by the smell that chap was emitting. He smelled as if he and his clothes had been kept in a suitcase in a musty attic for ten years, and the pungent stench of sweat added a special odour.

Pete did not even bother to hide his disgust. "Do you want something here?"

The boy checked him out of watery eyes, pulled up his nose noisily and spat out. "Nope. And you?" He had a strangely artificial, nasal voice and dragged out every word irresponsibly.

"Yes, I do—I work here." That was more or less true. Mathilda Jones, Jupiter's aunt, liked to use her nephew's friends for unskilled work. "Do you want to sell that thing here? Otherwise you should just go away."

"Give me a break," complained the stranger. His voice actually sounded almost as unpleasant as that of Skinny Norris, whom Pete detested with all his heart. "You're not particularly customer-friendly!"

Pete hesitated. He certainly did not want to be to blamed for the fact that the salvage yard lost a customer—not even if he was as unpleasant as this one.

"All right. Can I help you with something?"

"Nah," the boy said and spat out again. He turned away from Pete and faced the front of the salvage yard gate. At the same time, he held the antenna-like device away from him, as if he was afraid it might bite him.

Gradually Pete became angry. "Listen, you can't just stand here!"

"Yes, I can."

"You can't!"

"Can do."

"Do you want to buy something or not?"

"Nope."

"Then please leave, or..."

The boy grinned and showed a row of protruding teeth. "Or what?"

At this auspicious moment, a yellow Beetle turned the corner. It was Bob Andrews, Pete's best friend and colleague in their detective agency 'The Three Investigators', together with Jupiter Jones. Pete secretly breathed a sigh of relief. He really wasn't afraid of this strange guy, but he didn't like conversations that could end in a fight.

Relieved, he waved at Bob. "Bob!"

Bob parked his car by the side of the road next to the fence of the salvage yard. "Hello, Pete. Hello, Juve. Phee-eww! You stink! Where did you find those clothes?"

Pete gasped. "J-Juve?" In disbelief, Pete stared from Bob to the stranger.

But the stranger only frowned. "What? My name is not Jupe. And my clothes are none of your business!"

"Excuse me?" cried Bob. "Of course you are Jupe! Listen, the disguise is great, but disgusting. Could you please take those clothes off and burn them?"

Angrily the boy stared at him. "You listen to me. My name is not Jupe, and I don't know what you two clowns want from me. The boy who works here told me to hold this thing here and wait for him. It's an experiment, he said. And I'm getting fed up with it!"

Pete and Bob stared at him in amazement.

"Wait a minute," Bob said. "You're not Jupe?"

"What part of 'no' did you not understand? Do you want me to spell it out?"

"No, never mind." Bob was blushing pretty bad. "Sorry. So Jupe told you to wait here for him?"

"I don't know his name. Some black-haired fat guy."

"It's not as if you don't have a lot of bacon on your ribs," growled Pete.

"You know what?" said the boy. "I don't have to listen to this kind of talk. I'm not gonna stand here all day." All of a sudden, he handed Bob the antenna. "Do what you want with this thing." Without another word he turned on his heel and marched off along the fence.

Speechless, the two investigators watched him until the boy disappeared around the corner of the salvage yard.

"Good that he's gone," Pete finally said. "How on earth did you get the idea that that guy was Jupe in disguise? Boy, you're lucky that Jupe didn't hear you!"

"I just couldn't imagine he was real," Bob said. Frowning, he looked at the metal device in his hand. "And what is this? What shall we do with it?"

"An antenna, I'd say. What's that box in the middle?"

"I don't know."

At that moment, the box suddenly emitted a shrill beep and they both flinched. Bob dropped the thing and Pete caught it just in time before it could fall to the ground. The beeping ceased.

"A receiver!" cried Bob. "That's funny. Why is Jupe telling some complete stranger to stand outside the salvage yard with a receiver while he goes shopping?"

"The guy said it was an experiment. That looks just like Jupe again. Did he also send you a message that says he thinks that chap is Skinny Norris's cousin?"

"Huh? No. He just texted me to come here." Bob was waving the antenna. When he pointed it at the gate, it started beeping again. It stopped when Bob turned the antenna in another direction. "Hmm... that's clearly a radio signal, isn't it?"

"And the transmitter's probably in the salvage yard somewhere." Pete turned to face the gate. "Come on, let's take a closer look."

"But if Jupe wanted the boy to wait here..." Bob began.

"But we don't have to wait for him, do we? Come on!" Pete urged.

They followed the beep across the salvage yard, past the mountain of junk and scrap metal where their headquarters was hidden. It was not easy to follow the signal because it was reflected by all the metal and seemed to come from different directions. But they simply followed the paths they could walk and relied on the hope that Jupiter had not simply hidden the transmitter inside a huge pile of scrap metal.

The sound lured them between some high shelves on which all kinds of junk were piled up, until the canopy, under which Jupiter's uncle, Titus Jones, kept the more valuable things.

Bob turned with the antenna in his hand. "There, behind the pictures, it must be there!"

Pete pulled the old pictures forward. “Yes, there it is!” He bent down and picked up a grey box.

The two investigators looked around. “And now what?” Bob started, but a shrill beep from the receiver interrupted him. “Another one! I think Jupe has placed transmitters all over the yard!”

This time the beeping led them along the fence. They climbed over old machines, a rowing boat, an ancient merry-go-round and an even older pipe organ which Uncle Titus had performed with at a travelling circus in his youth. Finally, they came out by the shelves again—and there a fat boy sat on three old suitcases and pressed the button of a stopwatch.

“Congratulations,” he said with a grin. “You have beaten the estimated duration by nineteen seconds.”

Then he took the false teeth out of his mouth, his glasses, fake nose and pulled the greasy blond wig off his head.

2. Caesar's Cipher

Pete and Bob were left speechless. "Jupe!" cried Pete. "So it was you after all!"

"Of course," said Jupiter, self-satisfied. "I think I can say that this was one of my more successful disguises. I could only fool Bob by stubborn denial, but you, Pete, fell for it. I must admit, however, that I resorted to suggestive manipulation with you."

"Resorted to what?" Pete wondered.

"I sent you a message claiming that I saw an unpleasant character creeping around the salvage yard that I thought was a relative of Skinny Norris. Since you were not prepared for any deception on my part, you believed this statement to be true and came here expecting to find this dubious character. Bob, on the other hand, whom I had merely asked to come here, was expecting to see me. I suspect that you recognized me by my posture or a certain movement."

"Well," Bob said. "I thought it had to be you because you like to dress up and because you are always here. You didn't tell me you wanted to leave, so I knew you were just trying a disguise trick."

"And Pete stands here like a fool again," said Pete. "Thank you very much. I'm going to get a soda from Headquarters now, from where I always expect it to be—under a huge pile of junk. Of course, it won't surprise me if a real Fatty Norris is in there now."

Bob laughed. "Fatty Norris?"

"Don't be mad, Pete!" said Jupiter. "I had to try this disguise on someone."

"For the first and last time, I hope," said Bob, eyeing him in disgust as they headed for the Cold Gate. "What bin did you take these clothes from?"

"From a suitcase that Uncle Titus bought the day before yesterday from a customer for two dollars," said Jupiter. "This antenna was also in it, by the way, and I have spent the last two days making a working receiver for our tracking devices out of it."

"What's the point? We already have a receiver," Pete remarked.

"And now we have a second one as a back-up," Jupiter said, "in case, for example, another one breaks down during a car chase."

Bob opened the door of the Cold Gate—a huge old fridge and climbed inside. There, he triggered a secret mechanism that allowed the back wall to be pushed aside revealing a tunnel. Pete and Jupiter followed behind.

They marched through the tunnel under the artfully supported wood and metal scrap to Headquarters. This had once been a discarded mobile home trailer. Now it was a dented, scratched old wreck that only very remotely resembled a trailer.

Inside Headquarters, it was pure chaos. In one corner, there was a rubbish bag full of papers and files. The broken-down shelf stood in front of the door to the crime laboratory. The computer, which was supposed to be under the desk, lay on an armchair, together with the monitor, the printer, a pile of scrap paper and about a hundred ballpoint pens, pencils, felt-tip pens, erasers and rulers. The fridge stood where it should have been, but was blocked by three boxes of detective equipment and two tattered black office swivel chairs. The only thing that was in its original place and accessible was the answering machine, and it was not

only properly installed and wired, but also indicated that someone had left a message by regularly flashing a red light.

Jupiter ploughed his way through the trailer, switched on the connected loudspeaker and pressed the play button.

“Hello?” said a man’s voice, sounding agitated. “Why can’t I get to anybody there? What’s going on? My name is—uh—Professor Leon Battista Alberti. It’s about the following issue—I spell it out: ‘H-V-S-L-R-Q-D-J-H’. Ask Caesar. I expect you at three o’clock, not at my house, but in the park. It’s easy. Goodbye.”

Jupiter stopped the tape and rewound it.

“What was that?” Bob asked, irritated. “I didn’t understand a word.”

“It sounded like a coded message,” Jupiter replied and played the recorded message again. “That’s very interesting.”

“Oh no,” Pete moaned. “I know that sparkle in your eyes, Jupe. Please say what I want to hear just once. This guy’s crazy, so we should go surfing instead.”

Jupiter grinned. “On the contrary, Pete! Anyone who has ever dealt with cryptology knows immediately what it is all about. It is actually quite simple—at least the beginning.” He took a look at his watch. “I’m not so sure about the second part yet, but we should figure it out.”

“Cryptology?” Bob repeated. “You mean encryption and decryption?”

“Right. The sequence of letters is of course encrypted, and the key was provided to us by our unknown caller—Caesar!”

“Caesar?” Pete said. “Fine, if we’re going to start history lessons, I want my soda first. Bob, give me a hand.” He pushed away the two swivel chairs and began to heave the boxes to the side in front of the fridge. Bob helped out while Jupiter moved a chemical canister from the table to the floor and sat down on the corner that had been freed.

“This is not specifically about the person Julius Caesar, Pete,” he said. “It has to do with an encryption method said to be used by him for private and military correspondences. The Caesar cipher is one of the earliest known and simplest substitution ciphers. Each letter of a text is replaced by another letter some fixed number of positions in one direction of the alphabet. Historically, it involves three positions, for example, ‘A’ becomes ‘D’ when encrypting, and ‘D’ becomes ‘A’ when decrypting.

“This method was considered absolutely secure for centuries, but was later replaced by much more complicated encryption methods. Nowadays, every child can write secret texts following Caesar’s method and above all decode them.”

“So, of course, the name of our caller is not Leon Battista Alberti,” said Bob.

“It is highly unlikely,” Jupe said. “Leon Battista Alberti was an Italian writer, architect and mathematician. He lived in Florence in the fifteenth century and he too, had developed an encryption method that was much more sophisticated compared to the Caesar cipher.”

“All right.” Pete opened the fridge door and took out three bottles of lemonade, which he distributed. “So he uses the name only as an alias and a clue to the encryption. And according to this method, the first letter would not be a ‘H’, but an ‘E’?”

“And the second not a ‘V’, but an ‘S’,” Bob pondered. “And the rest—”

“I have already deciphered it,” said Jupiter.

“You’ve done nothing else since you stopped being a child star,” Pete quipped as he referred to Jupiter’s glorious past as a child actor playing ‘Baby Fatso’—the youngest member of a funny children’s TV series, *The Wee Rogues*. It was a role that Jupiter detested till today.

They squatted on the swivel chairs, turned around, drank soda and calculated around with letters until after a short time they had the result.

“E-S-P-I-O-N-A-G-E,” said Pete. “Jupe, you can’t be serious? The guy is crazy! We’re not in the Cold War anymore!”

“There is a lot of espionage that has nothing to do with war,” said Jupiter. “But I am concerned with something else. Where shall we go to meet this man who calls himself Professor Alberti?”

They listened to the recording again.

““Not at my house, but in the park?”” Pete said. “The good man has forgotten to give his address! And not even a telephone number for queries—if you ask me, we can go surfing... or I could go home and continue mowing the lawn, and you can help me... or—”

“Wait, Pete!” said Jupiter. “I don’t think that our caller—let’s call him Professor Alberti for now—would bother to send us an encrypted message and then forget to give his address. I believe that the second part is also encrypted, not just the word ‘espionage’.”

“Since he said ‘it’s easy’ at the end of the message,” Bob said, “I suppose he meant that this second part of the puzzle is easy to solve as well.”

“So he thinks we could easily find out where we have to go.” Pete leaned back, put his feet on the fridge and took another sip of lemonade. “Well, and where is that going to be? I think it’s much too hot to think today, and I’ve been working hard all day.”

“Professor Alberti is not expecting us at his house at three o’clock, but in the park,” said Bob. “But where is ‘at home’ or ‘not at home’? Where does he live? And how are we going to find out if we don’t even know his real name?”

“Leon Battista Alberti lived in Florence,” said Jupiter.

Bob took a look at his watch “One and a half hours flying to Italy? I think Pete is right after all. This guy’s nuts.”

“Or maybe not.” Pete sat up, took his feet off the fridge and was suddenly awake again. “If he really means Florence, then maybe the Florence neighbourhood in south Los Angeles.”

Jupiter stared at him. “Of course, you are right! This is the solution! Florence!” He jumped up and dug in one of the boxes for the big map of Los Angeles that usually hung on the ceiling of the trailer. He unfolded the map. “Here it is—and we can reach there if we hurry!”

“Yes, but where will we go then?” Bob asked.

“To the park, of course!”

“And what park?”

“I would try Franklin D Roosevelt Park,” said Pete.

Jupiter and Bob looked up from the map. “You are getting scary,” said Jupiter. “There is indeed a park marked out here which is called Franklin D Roosevelt Park! How did you know that?”

Pete grinned. “On Graham Avenue, right? That’s the only sports field in Florence, and that’s where the Beach Rockers once played against the Florence Falcons. So, are we going?”

“Jupe, you should change your clothes and take a shower first,” Bob said as he looked with disgust at the musty smelling costume of the First Investigator. “I wouldn’t want that smell in my car.”

“Unfortunately there is no time for that,” Jupiter said and reached for his detective’s case, which contained a camera and a few other useful items. “We have to hurry if we want to get there on time. Come on, fellas!”

Bob moaned.

They left Headquarters and climbed into Bob's yellow Beetle. Pete got in at the back, Bob and Jupiter at the front, and Bob immediately cranked the side window all the way down. "Come on, Jupe, wind down the window—the smell is unbearable!"

"That is part of the art of disguise," Jupiter said as he wound down the window. "Not only the costume, but other things have to be convincing. For example, gait, facial expressions, typical movements and even the smell. But you are right, I find it rather unpleasant as well."

"Actually, to call it 'rather unpleasant' is an understatement," Bob commented as he drove off. "Your uncle really bought this stinky stuff?"

"Actually, he just bought the suitcase. He got it from a major household liquidation in Glendale. He had simply asked me to empty it, clean it and, if necessary, repair it."

"You'll never get the stink out of the suitcase," Bob remarked.

"That is not my problem," Jupiter replied with a grin.

3. A Parcel in the Park

They drove along the coastal road to Los Angeles. Pete cast longing glances at the sea and muttered something like 'great waves' and 'ideal surfing weather' from time to time, but Bob drove mercilessly into the city. After some searching, they found Graham Avenue and Franklin D Roosevelt Park.

At the car park, they got out and looked around. A row of dark green bushes grew in front of them, and behind them was a large, completely empty sports field.

"It's exactly three o'clock," said Pete. "Where is our professor?"

At that moment the mobile phone in Jupiter's pocket rang. He fished it out.

"The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking... Ah, Professor! May I ask how you got our telephone number... Aha... Where are we? In the car park at Franklin D Roosevelt Park... Thank you very much, sir. Not at all, this is purely routine work for us... I beg your pardon?" He turned once in a circle and looked around. "The red transmission tower? Yes, of course, we'll get there. Goodbye." He turned off the phone and put it back in his pocket.

"So?" Bob asked.

"Professor Alberti seems very secretive," said Jupiter. "He doesn't want to talk to us here, but at the red transmission tower over there." He pointed to a mast that was on the other side of the sports field. "Let's go."

They marched across the field. The sun burned hot on their heads, no one was in sight far and wide. And the closer they came to the transmission tower, the more clearly they saw that nobody was waiting for them there.

"He will probably call us again," said Jupiter.

They stopped next to the tower and waited. Jupiter pulled out the mobile phone.

One minute.

Two minutes.

"How long does he actually think we'll take to cross the sports field," grumbled Pete.

"Call him, Juve."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. The number is unlisted."

They kept waiting, but the mobile phone remained silent.

"Maybe he's hiding something here and we need to find him first," Bob said.

"Good idea, Bob!" said Jupiter. "Let's have a look around!"

They searched the ground and also took a close look at the tower, but found nothing to suggest a message or clue.

In the meantime, a quarter of an hour had passed and the unknown caller had not got back in touch.

"I don't like this," Jupiter said with a frown. "We must have missed something! But I don't see any other transmission tower either. This one must be it!"

They searched further, found nothing, and the next quarter of an hour passed without anything happening.

"That was a total failure," Pete said angrily. "He took us for fools! Because of such a prankster, we have wasted the whole afternoon coming here! Come on, I've had enough!" He stomped off towards the car.

“Wait, Pete!” Jupiter shouted after him. “I just don’t believe that anyone would go to such lengths just for us—”

Pete just marched on. Jupiter and Bob had no choice but to follow him. Dissatisfied, they returned to the car and got in.

Bob was driving off when suddenly Jupiter shouted sharply: “Stop!”

Bob stepped on the brakes so hastily that all three were thrown forward. “What’s wrong now?”

Instead of answering, Jupiter opened the door and got out. He went to the back of the car and found a cord tied to the rear bumper. On the other end of the cord was a package the size of a shoe box, wrapped in grey paper. He bent down, untied the string and took the package.

With that he got back into the car. “The matter is clear, fellas. We have fallen for an ancient trick. Our mysterious caller just wanted to lure us away from the car to attach this package to it. From our location near the transmitter tower, we couldn’t see him through the bushes. He must have been hiding in the bushes over there somewhere.”

“Strange behaviour for a professor,” said Bob.

“Perhaps he’s not even a professor—he just calls himself that!” Pete said impatiently. “Open the parcel, Juve.”

“Yeah, yeah, all right. Don’t drive off yet. Maybe it’ll give us a clue about our strange caller.” Jupiter untied the knots, unwrapped the paper and opened the box. Inside were two things—a hundred dollar note and a single, neatly folded sheet of paper.

“Wow!” Pete said and bent forward between the seats. “Someone is desperate to persuade us to co-operate, huh?”

“It’s possible. But I wonder...” Jupiter took the banknote in his hand. “I thought as much. The banknote is not real, it’s just a colour copy—and not even a very good one. Benjamin Franklin is visible on both sides. On a real banknote, however, Independence Hall would be depicted on the back.”

“What’s the point of that?” Bob asked.

“Let’s see...” Jupiter unfolded the sheet of paper and read out loud:

By the time you read this letter, you may have been lured away from the car. However, you have overcome this distraction by your subsequent attention. Whatever it is, I’ve come to the conclusion that I can trust your abilities.

I need your help. For years, I have been persecuted and watched, and now my enemies have succeeded. They have stolen my most valuable invention—the ‘Oculus Audiens’! The police do not believe me and will not take action. Therefore, I ask you to help me to get it back.

If you want to help me, visit me this coming Friday evening at my house, USVH LEOO FUHVZSR. Caesar will tell you where that is. Let Mr Franklin help you, but only in the normal way! I expect you! You can spend the night here in my house.

The Polymath

“I’m confused,” said Pete. “What is that which was stolen from him there? An eyepiece?”

“An *Oculus Audiens*.” Jupiter frowned. “Unless I’m very much mistaken, that’s Latin for ‘Hearing Eye’.”

“And what is that?” Bob asked.

“I have no idea.”

They got out of the car and examined the immediate surroundings, but there was no trace to be found of their strange client. Jupiter pinched his lower lip and finally shrugged. "Let's go home."

"The message itself isn't that difficult, is it?" said Pete when they had returned to Headquarters. "If it's Caesar again, you should be able to figure out the solution in a flash."

"That's what I thought at first too," said Jupiter, armed with a pencil and paper, he set about deciphering the words. "But take the first word 'USVH'. Caesar turns it into 'RPSE'... and 'LEOO' becomes 'IBLL'. That doesn't mean anything to me."

"That's right," Pete admitted and sat down on the fridge. "Now what about the counterfeit note? Benjamin Franklin is depicted on it. But how is he gonna help us decipher it?"

"Maybe there's something written on it," Bob said and he grabbed the piece of paper and examined it closely. But he found nothing. It was a perfectly normal double-sided copy of the front of a perfectly normal banknote.

Frowning, Jupiter looked at his deciphering notes. He had written the alphabets and Caesar's cipher side by side and tried out different versions—a shift of four, then five letters. None of it made any sense. "Obviously I missed a clue. Let's go over the letter again, fellas."

"Some facts are clear," Bob skimmed the lines. "The guy's an inventor and he's being followed... Or he's suffering from paranoia... and he wants us to help him recover an invention called the 'Hearing Eye' that was stolen from him. But then comes this encoded place name, and I don't understand Mr Franklin at all. And what is a 'polymath'?"

"This could mean 'a person of wide knowledge or learning', otherwise known as a 'universal genius'," Jupiter explained. "It is someone who is well versed in many different subjects. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, was a painter, sculptor, architect, astronomer, geologist, philosopher and many more. And our Leon Battista Alberti was one too—writer, linguist, architect, philosopher and cryptographer. So our unknown client either thinks he is Professor Alberti, or he thinks he is a polymath himself."

"He could be, couldn't he?" Pete said. "After all, he does cryptography and invents some valuable—uh—inventions."

"That's right," said Jupiter. "Meanwhile, before we proceed further, we have to figure out what his message means."

In the following half hour, Jupiter racked his brains over the encrypted text, Bob surfed the Internet, while Pete spoke to his girlfriend Kelly on the phone.

"Fellas, I've got something here," Bob suddenly shouted. "Jupe, this might help you. I looked up polymath scholars. Our Benjamin Franklin was one. He was not only a politician and one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, but also a writer, scientist and inventor. He proposed a spelling reform of the English language and came up with a 'phonetic alphabet'. In it, he left out some letters, in particular 'C', 'J', 'Q', 'W', 'X' and 'Y', and designed a few new characters. Why don't you see if that fits?"

"That's exactly it, Bob!" cried Jupiter. "That's what the professor meant! If we let Mr Franklin help us 'in the normal way', it means that we only use the familiar letters, but not his invented ones! Write down the excluded letters for me!"

Bob did that. Taking out these six letters from the alphabet, there were only twenty left to play with, and Jupiter continued to fiddle about with zeal. After two minutes, he had it. "So, fellas. Our professor stays at Rose Hall, Breston."

"So where is Breston?" Pete asked.

A quick look at the map and a slightly longer search on the Internet told them that it was located northeast of Los Angeles on the edge of the desert, about three hours' drive away.

"The question now is—do we accept the assignment, fellas?" Jupiter asked.

"Is that really a question?" Bob said as he turned off the computer. "'We investigate anything', do we not? And this certainly sounds more interesting than sorting through files."

"Very good," Jupiter said with satisfaction. "Then we'll just have to let our folks at home know that we'll be away from Friday to Saturday."

"And would you perhaps like to hear my opinion too?" Pete asked snappily. "Or am I here to just make up the numbers?"

"On the contrary, Pete!" Jupe said, not knowing what to expect from Pete. "What do you think?"

Pete grinned. "I am in! All right—today is Wednesday. Since I've just promised my mother that I'd definitely finish mowing the lawn by this evening, I'd better get home now. And after school tomorrow, if I go surfing immediately and don't get home until around eleven o'clock at night, maybe I can tolerate the heat in the desert on Friday." He jumped up from the fridge and the whole trailer swayed. "See you tomorrow at school!"

"I'm coming with you," Bob said. "See you tomorrow, Jupe! And please, for the sake of my car and our noses—take a shower!"

4. The Polymath

It was hot, unbearably hot. Since Bob had categorically rejected all suggestions to turn the Beetle into a convertible with the help of a hacksaw, the detectives were completely sweaty when they arrived in Breston late Friday afternoon after a drive through the mountains.

The low, flat-roofed houses cast almost no usable shade on the wide, dusty road, and there seemed to be no trees at all. When they asked for Rose Hall at a petrol station, the petrol pump attendant pointed to a road that led straight out into the desert.

“Take water with you” was his discouraging comment. “Plenty of water.”

“How far is it to Rose Hall?” Jupiter asked.

“Eight kilometres,” said the petrol station attendant. “But if your car breaks down in the middle of it, you’ll need the water. What are you going to do at Rose Hall?”

“Do you know the owner?” Jupiter asked back.

The man pushed his cowboy hat back and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Do I know Granville? Nah, I wouldn’t say I know him. He’s crazy, if you ask me. Regularly mixes up the town council meetings here with his ideas. Last year, he had the crazy idea of building a glass dome over Breston to improve plant growth. The guy wanted to turn our town into a bloody greenhouse! Argued with every single council member for weeks over it! I wouldn’t go there if I were you. What do you want with him?”

“We... uh... are friends of his niece and are supposed to send him our best regards since we are in the area,” Jupiter lied.

“I see. Well, give my regards to him as well. That’ll be twenty dollars for the petrol.”

Jupiter took another big canister of water, Bob paid, and they drove out into the desert.

“So his name is Granville and he’s known in the area as a weirdo,” Jupiter said.

“If he’s so weird that he argues with everyone over some idiotic idea, I don’t want to meet him at all,” Pete commented.

“Oh, inventors and scientists are always regarded as a bit eccentric by their neighbours,” Jupiter said and took a big sip of water. “He’s probably not that bad.”

After a short time, they came to a lonely sign post where a sandy single-lane road branched off, and went northwards. The Californian desert stretched on both sides—dusty white sand, tough dark grass and prickly cacti under the endless blue sky. Only on the horizon could the bluish outlines of the mountains be seen. Luckily The Three Investigators didn’t have to worry about their water supply because the path led straight ahead to a tall, dark house with three smaller outbuildings, which were probably sheds, but they looked quite desolate with their corrugated iron roofs.

Bob parked the Beetle in front of the house. The three of them got out, marched to the door and rang the bell.

The man who opened the door was very tall, very thin and was wearing a grey suit despite the scorching heat. The white shirt was buttoned up to the collar. He had dusty grey hair, a gaunt, wrinkled face and looked like a sad old dog. Wordlessly, he looked from one investigator to the next and finally said: “Yes?”

“Mr Granville?” asked Jupiter.

“Yes.”

“We are The Three Investigators.”

The sad dog’s look did not change, did not betray either recognition or interest. “So?”

Jupiter frowned in irritation. “Didn’t you expect us?”

“No,” said Mr Granville. “No, I couldn’t say that. What is this about?”

“Isn’t this Rose Hall?”

“Yes,” said the dusty man.

“Then it must be correct,” Jupiter said firmly. “We want to see a man who lives here and is an inventor. If you are not, would you kindly tell us where we can find him.”

From inside the house, a loud call interrupted him. “Matthew! Don’t be more senile than you already are! The investigators are here to see me.”

Mr Granville’s eyes narrowed, but his voice remained unchanged. “You want my brother Winston Granville. Come on in.”

He let them in, and Winston Granville was coming out and met them halfway. He looked as grey and wrinkled as his brother, but wore old jeans and an open shirt. His movements were lively and energetic, and his voice were so loud that it echoed in the entrance hall.

“So you have found me! Excellent, excellent! Matthew, I’m sure the boys would love a drink. Juice? Beer? Lemonade? I’m sure you’ll find something suitable. Come on, boys, come on!”

The Three Investigators took a furtive look at Matthew Granville to see how he took being ordered around like that, but he already turned and walked away wordlessly. So they followed Winston.

The inventor led them into a large room that might have once been a living room, but had long since been converted into a laboratory. Books and papers were piled up on two sofas; three beautiful old wooden tables had been ruined by acid, fire and sharp-edged objects; and there were plastic and metal gadgets everywhere, the purpose of which remained completely mysterious to The Three Investigators.

Winston Granville did not give them time to look around in detail. “So you’ve solved my little puzzles. Very nice, very nice! I must admit I had my doubts—but now that you are here, boys, I need your help. I have been robbed! I have always expected that there would be many envious people and enemies! But I never thought that it would really... that it would really happen...

“When can you start? What are your fees? However, I’ve heard that you’ve worked for poor scientists for free at times—ha ha ha! All jokes aside, this is serious. We will of course prepare a bedroom for you. Have Matthew show you the room. Matthew! The boys are thirsty after all! Do you have much luggage? Never mind, never mind, the house is big enough. When we bought it two years ago—”

“Sir,” Jupiter interrupted, “before we decide whether to accept the assignment and spend the night here, we would like to ask a few questions.”

“Of course, my boy, just ask, just ask! And sit down!”

Since there was no place to sit down, they stood there. Mr Granville didn’t sit down either, but wandered around the room, moved a microscope, picked up a book from the sofa and flipped through it without reading anything, threw it back on the pile and didn’t bother stopping a stack of books slipping and crashing to the floor.

Matthew Granville came into the room with a tray and three juice glasses, offered first to Pete, then Jupiter and then Bob a glass and left without even waiting for their thanks.

“Mr Granville,” Jupiter began, “we first need to know what has been stolen from you so that we can search for it. What is the ‘Hearing Eye’?”

“Ah, so you’ve already translated that!” said Mr Granville. “The *Oculus Audiens* is a revolutionary invention. It can be used to find things of national importance—important, priceless things! Knowledge, my boy, is the business of the future!”

“And what exactly is it?” asked Jupiter persistently.

“It hears... and it sees... as the name says—ha ha ha! That’s all you need to know about it. I just want you to make sure I get it back! It is very important! Countless lives depend on it!”

“Hold on,” Bob said. “Why do human lives depend on us getting that ‘Eye’ back for you? Isn’t that a bit exaggerated?”

“I never exaggerate!” said Mr Granville in an outrage. “Indeed, my boy, I am objectivity itself. Ingenuity and objectivity are not mutually exclusive, if that’s what you meant to imply!”

“No, of course not,” Bob said hastily.

“That would be extremely impolite too, young man,” said Mr Granville with sparkling eyes. “Will you accept the job—yes or no?”

Jupiter gave Pete and Bob a quick glance and said: “Yes. We will try to bring the *Oculus Audiens* back to you.”

“Very good, very good! Then I suggest you go—”

“One moment, Mr Granville,” Jupiter interrupted him. “You still haven’t told us what it is. Is it a machine?”

“Yes, call it a machine if you want,” cried Mr Granville impatiently. “In fact, it’s much more than that, but you wouldn’t understand that anyway.”

“What does it look like?” Bob asked.

“Well—like a little grey box,” said Mr Granville. “Three buttons, two switches and an antenna. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“Who do you suspect stole it?” Pete asked.

“Who do I suspect? Goodness, how should I know? I have so many enemies—all envious people and spies!”

Jupiter prepared himself with patience. “Mr Granville, we can only help you if you give us some clues. When and where was the *Oculus Audiens* stolen?”

“When? The past Tuesday night. Where? Here, from this room. I was in town at the time, at a town council meeting. They’re all unimaginative half-wits. Not one of them is a visionary! But America needs visionaries—men like Benjamin Franklin! Like Thomas Alva Edison! Like me! But no, it’s run by bureaucrats and ignoramuses!”

“Uh... yes,” said Jupiter. “Where was your brother at the time of the theft? Was he here in the house?”

“Of course he was here!” said Mr Granville. “My brother is always here. He doesn’t like going out. He doesn’t believe in parties. He doesn’t even like to set off fireworks on Independence Day. But he makes excellent coffee for me when I’m feeling down. I wouldn’t know what to do without him. We are very attached to each other, you know.” His eyes suddenly became very narrow. “Or are you saying you suspect my brother of having something to do with this?”

“I can’t say anything yet, sir,” replied Jupiter politely. “We must first rule out all eventualities. Where was the device then?”

“Over there, on the table by the window.”

“It’s open, I see.”

“Of course it is! I need air while working! Or do you expect me to get headaches and poisoning with the windows closed tight?”

“No, sir. Is the window always open? Even when you are away? Even at night?”

“Yes, of course. As you may have seen, we don’t exactly live in the middle of a metropolitan area. Occasional burglars are rather rare here!”

“Who are your... uh... next-door neighbours?”

“Coyotes, rattlesnakes, iguanas and Breston.”

“And are there regular visitors here? The postman or a cleaning lady or—”

“This is all too tiresome for me,” said Mr Granville impatiently. “My brother can tell you about such things. I don’t deal with them. And now I suggest that you go to your room first. Then you can eat in the kitchen or something like that. I have a lot to do. I must work!”

With this, he pushed Jupiter out the door, and Pete and Bob hurriedly followed. Behind them, the door slammed shut.

Matthew Granville seemed to have been waiting for them, as he stood around in the hall doing nothing. While the three boys were still looking at each other in bewilderment, he said: “This way,” and climbed the dark wooden stairs to the second floor. So they followed him.

Upstairs, he led them to a large room with nothing but a worn grey carpet, three clean mattresses, pillows and blankets.

“You must excuse me,” he said stiffly. “I was not prepared for your visit. The guest beds are folded up and dusty in the attic.”

“Your brother didn’t tell you anything about us?” Bob asked incredulously.

“These things happen,” replied Matthew. “You can bring your things up here. In half an hour, you can come into the kitchen for dinner—down the stairs and through the door with the glass window.”

“Well, yes,” said Jupiter. “Thank you, Mr Granville.”

“No need to thank me,” said the dusty grey man completely expressionlessly—not even his sad doggy eyes changed. “If it were up to me, you would spend the night out in the desert. Believe me, it would be better for you. But it would be even better if you hadn’t come here at all.” He turned around and walked out.

The Three Investigators looked at each other in amazement.

Finally Pete said: “Jupe?”

“I already know what you’re going to say.” Jupiter sighed. “I am prepared to correct my first guess from ‘weird’ to ‘very weird’.”

Bob just shook his head.

“Do you want my opinion?” Pete asked. “We should go home. It may be that Mr Winston Granville is a universal genius and his brother is just a butler, but they’re both universal madmen!”

5. The Suspects

Since half an hour was more than enough time to carry a few bags up the stairs and wash their hands and face, Pete then suggested that they take a closer look around the house. That sounded like a good idea after all as there were several floors, an attic and probably a basement too.

But apparently the Granville brothers were not only ‘weird’, they were both completely paranoid, because apart from a door to a small bathroom, every single door in the whole house was locked. And when they went outside, they also found the three corrugated metal sheds behind the house locked.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, then gave himself a jerk and marched resolutely towards the open window of the laboratory. As he found no footprints on the rock-hard ground in front of the window, he stood there and realized that Mr Granville had been quite negligent with his valuable invention. From his position, Jupiter could have easily cleared half the table without even standing on his toes.

“Hello, Mr Granville,” he shouted into the room.

The inventor, who was sitting at one of the other two scratched tables and writing something on a piece of paper, almost fell off his chair in shock.

Angrily, he turned to Jupiter. “What is this? How dare you frighten me like that? I am working!”

“So are we,” Jupiter replied. “You hired us as investigators. Is there anyone who knew about your invention? Or was it secret?”

“Such things are always secret,” said Mr Granville, whose face turned slightly red. “But everyone who lives around here knows that I’m an inventor.”

“So could it be that the thief wasn’t really after the ‘Hearing Eye’ at all, but just took something with him just by chance?”

“No! Nonsense! It’s all about the ‘Eye’, nothing else!”

“What motive could the thief have? In your first call to us, you mentioned ‘espionage’, and your subsequent note said that you had enemies. Who are these enemies, Mr Granville?”

“I told you—envious and begrudging fools who think they are scientists themselves! They are ridiculous!”

“Really? Does anyone fitting that description live around here?” Jupe asked.

“Ha! That someone lives over in Breston—but he’s definitely not a scientist! He’s a charlatan, that’s all!”

“What’s his name?”

“John Frazier.” His eyes narrowed, and he asked, almost lurking: “Do you know him?”

“No, Mr Granville.”

“Ah...” The inventor visibly relaxed. “And what are you going to do now? Go to Breston and politely ask him if he stole my invention? Ha!”

“So far, we are only investigating,” said Jupiter. “Is this Mr Frazier the only person in the area that you consider an enemy?”

“I say it again—he is one of those envious ones!” Apparently he didn’t want to answer the question and Jupiter decided to let it go for now.

“One more question, Mr Granville. Do you always leave all windows open, but lock all doors in the house?”

“What?” the polymath responded irritably. “Uh... no. Why? Are the doors locked? How odd. Of course they’re not. I’ll tell Matthew to unlock them. Now go away, I’m busy!” He sat down at the table again and turned his back on Jupiter. So The Three Investigators returned to the house.

In the old-fashioned, spotlessly clean kitchen, Matthew stood at the gas cooker and fried eggs with bacon. He cast a disgruntled glance at his guests. “Sit down there at the table.”

“Mr Granville,” said Jupiter, “obviously you were not expecting us and are not pleased with our visit. How is it that your brother has not told you about this? You knew about the theft of the *Oculus Audiens*?”

“My brother does not tell me everything he does and I do not tell him everything I do. But of course I knew about the theft. He told me on Thursday.”

“On Thursday?” Bob asked. “But the device was stolen on Tuesday night!”

“My brother has a tendency to overthink things.”

“Didn’t he call the police?” Pete asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“He decided not to.”

“Why?”

“Because he didn’t want to involve them.”

“Why not?”

“Because then the public would know immediately and my brother doesn’t like the public.”

This didn’t sound like the Winston Granville who publicly bickered with Breston Town Council, but Jupiter decided to overlook this for the time being. He sat down at the table. “Please tell us exactly what happened from Tuesday night to Thursday.”

Matthew pulled a face and pushed the eggs around in the pan as he spoke. “Winston left for Breston at about seven o’clock for the town council meeting. I cleaned up a bit here in the house and went to bed at ten o’clock. Then I read until about eleven o’clock before I fell asleep.”

“Did you hear when your brother came home?” Jupiter asked.

“No. He doesn’t always come back from these sessions until 11:30 or 12 midnight.”

“Did you hear anything suspicious that night?”

“No.”

“And what did your brother do on Wednesday?”

“He was already awake when I got up and locked himself in his laboratory until noon. He often does that. At noon, he would come out for lunch. He was a bit gloomy, but he often is when he is brooding over a scientific problem. He then went out and didn’t come back until the evening.”

“That was the day he called us,” Pete said. “How does he even know us?”

“I do not know. I didn’t know you at all.” The dismissive look with which he said that spoke volumes. “I’ve never heard of children being investigators, either.”

“Young adults, please,” said Jupiter. “And we have already solved several cases where the police have failed. Here is our card.” He pulled a business card from his pocket and handed it to Mr Granville. It said:



The man studied the card in detail. “Hmm, aha. I see.” Finally he gave it back to Juve.

“What did you do on Wednesday when your brother was away?” Bob asked.

“Please, it’s none of your business.” Matthew took the pan off the cooker and gave each of The Three Investigators a good helping of bacon and eggs on a plate. “Eat this. What did I do? I read... wrote a few letters... fixed the water tank.”

“What was broken? I hope it didn’t leak,” Bob said.

“No, the water level gauge didn’t work, that’s all.”

“Where is the water tank?” asked Jupiter.

“In one of the sheds outside.”

“And how often is it refilled?”

“What does this has to do with your investigation?”

“I don’t know,” said Jupiter with a trusting look. “I am just curious.”

“Every Tuesday evening a small tanker truck comes here from Breston,” Matthew reluctantly said.

“Aha,” said Jupiter. “Interesting. Did he come the past Tuesday too?”

“When I say every Tuesday, I mean every Tuesday. And before you ask any more such stupid questions—no, the driver had neither the time nor the opportunity to steal Winston’s invention because I was supervising him all the time.”

“Who else comes here regularly?” Bob asked, chewing. “Your brother said we should ask you about it.”

“Selma Fields, the cleaning lady, comes every Saturday.”

“No one else? What about the postman?”

“Mrs Fields always brings the mail. Sometimes one of us goes to Breston to send or collect letters.”

“I see,” Bob remarked. “Just to be on the safe side, you didn’t notice anything suspicious on Tuesday evening and night or on Wednesday?”

“Nothing at all,” said Mr Granville.

“But if there was something to notice, would you have noticed it?”

“Probably not. Firstly, I sleep very soundly, and secondly, I had so much to do in the house on Wednesday that the most I would have noticed was crashing and banging, but not a thief who just had to reach through the window.”

“Thank you, Mr Granville.” Jupiter pushed back his empty plate and stood up. “It was really delicious. Come on, fellas.”

6. A Strange Find

Actually, The Three Investigators had little inclination to stay at the house of these two strange brothers who had a case in store for them, but did not give them any useful information and hardly seemed to talk to each other. But by now, it had become dark and they decided to interview Selma Fields, the cleaning lady, the next day before they went to Breston to look for John Frazier. So they lay down on the mattresses, listened to the silence in the desert for a while and then fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, all three of them startled. A short, hard jolt had gone through the whole house, and the old wooden walls crunched and creaked loudly. The house shivered as if it was alive, and from a distance, a group of coyotes howled. Immediately after that, everything was quiet again.

Bob sighed deeply. "Why can't these stupid continental plates collide somewhere else? Kansas, for instance?"

"We could exchange them for the tornadoes." Jupiter yawned and snuggled back under his blanket. "As long as it's not a big earthquake, I don't mind."

Pete said nothing—he had already fallen asleep again.

When Bob woke up the next time, the full moon shone through the window right into his face. He wasn't sure what had woken him—the light or the silence. At home in Rocky Beach, he could always hear a car on the road somewhere, with the sea waves roaring in the background. It was never really quiet. But here in the desert, there was dead silence—apart from Jupiter's quiet snoring and the occasional puff from Pete's direction.

Bob tried to fall asleep again, but he couldn't. He became more and more awake and his feet became cold. Finally, he got up quietly and stepped up to the open window. The full moon stood high above the desert, which looked almost white and stretched to the horizon. Countless stars sparkled in the sky. The night wind was cool and Bob shivered.

He was about to lie down again when he noticed something. There was a light in one of the sheds. He took a look at his watch. It was 2:30 am. Who was out in the shed in the middle of the night?

At that moment, the light went out. A man left the shed. He carried a shovel over his shoulder. Bob couldn't see who it was, but it had to be one of the Granville brothers. The man shut the shed door, locked it and walked back to the house. Shortly afterwards, Bob heard a door in the house close.

He sneaked up to Jupiter and pushed him slightly. "Jupe!" he whispered. "Wake up! Something's happening here!"

Jupiter was awake immediately. With Pete, it took a little longer. Whispering, Bob told them what he had seen.

"Crazy," Pete thought. "Don't they have all day to dig? Why do they do it at night?"

"And why when we are here?" Bob added. "Why don't they just wait until we're gone and it's clear?"

"Let's have a look," Jupiter decided, and they quickly got dressed, grabbed their flashlights and crept to the door.

The staircase was dark, but they could see the ground floor. A faint light shone through the gap of the ajar basement door. As quietly as they could, The Three Investigators crept to the stairs and descended one step at a time. The wooden steps creaked softly under their feet and several times, they stopped and listened.

No sound came up to them from below. Carefully, they crept all the way to the bottom and Bob peered through the gap of the basement door. Behind it, as expected, was another staircase leading down. Bob pulled the door open further, and the three of them crept down.

Below, they found themselves in a passageway about eight metres long, which looked like an old mine tunnel. Six ancient wooden columns carried equally old beams that supported the passageway. In the middle of the passageway, on either side, were two doors made of rough sawn boards, and another such door at the end was half open. From there came the faint yellowish glow of a lamp that was apparently placed on the ground.

Everything was quiet—until suddenly a dull thud sounded, followed by a rumble. Immediately afterwards a voice hissed: “Quiet!”

“It’s not my fault that the ground here is just sand and boulders,” a second voice replied grumpily. “If you’re not happy, then do it yourself!”

“No, my friend, you do what you’re paid to do,” said the first voice. Now the boys recognized this voice—it was Matthew Granville. He sounded a lot sharper than they had ever heard him before. “And keep the noise down!”

“Why?” asked the other, whose voice was unknown to them. “Your brother is fast asleep, isn’t he?”

“Like a baby... I made sure of that. But he brought three boys into the house, and I couldn’t put anything into their drinks without them noticing. Just dig quietly!”

The Three Investigators looked around for a good hiding place. Pete pushed Jupiter and pointed to one of the two closed wooden doors. Jupiter nodded. They crept there and carefully opened the door. It was pitch dark inside. Silently they got in and closed the door. Then they stood in the darkness and listened.

The other man shovelled for a few minutes and then stopped again. “How deep is this gonna be?”

“Continue digging,” Matthew Granville said. “You will know how deep when you hit something.”

The digging continued with the regular sound of a shovel being shoved into a pile of sand and debris and dumped somewhere.

“Why did it have to be tonight?” asked the other man.

“Because it is necessary,” Matthew replied in a very unpleasant tone of voice. “And I always do what is necessary. You understand me?”

“Well, sure...”

There were a few more solid blows, and finally, the shovel struck something hard.

“Yeah! I’ve hit something!” the other man gasped.

“Good!” Matthew said. “Dig around it and take it out.”

“Yeah, I know.”

It took the man another three minutes or so to dig and take out the thing that was buried.

“That’s enough!” Matthew said. “Now you get out of here.”

Shortly, The Three Investigators heard the two men come out of the back room, the door closed, and a key turned. The men walked past their hiding place, up the stairs and out of the basement. The next moment, the door was locked, trapping Jupiter, Pete and Bob in the basement.

“What now?” whispered Pete.

"How do we get out of this basement?" Bob asked. "Pete, I hope you brought your lock picks."

"I did," Pete replied. "But we have to be careful when we try to get out in case they catch us in the process. In any case, I certainly don't want to wait for the cleaning lady to find us here in the morning... if she even comes down here, which I don't think she will."

"We probably have to wait a while until the coast is clear," Bob suggested.

"What do we do in the meantime?" Pete wondered.

"Concentrate, fellas," said Jupiter. "You better think. What could Matthew Granville hide down here? Why is it necessary for him and his hired helper to dig it in the middle of the night? And why does he keep it so secret from his brother that he even gives him sleeping pills?"

"Because the brother would probably start babbling something about a conspiracy against him," Pete said.

"Well, but that's really some kind of conspiracy, isn't it?" Bob added.

"And why does it all have to be tonight?" Jupiter continued. "Is Matthew under time pressure? Why can't he do it tomorrow when we're away?"

"Maybe this other man only has time to dig for him tonight," said Pete. "Whatever it is, I would like to leave now. This house and all its occupants give me the creeps."

Jupiter gave himself a jolt. "We should now get into the back room and look around."

"Are you sure you want to go in there now?" Pete asked. "They might come back and catch us red-handed."

"There couldn't be a better time," Jupiter decided. "If they do come back, we will figure out what to do then. As a precaution, perhaps Bob can stay close at the top of the stairs and warn us if they do come back."

Jupiter turned on his flashlight and opened the door of their hiding place. Juve and Pete went to the back room while Bob crept up the stairs to keep watch. Pete took about two minutes to pick the lock. Then slowly, Juve opened the door and crept in.

Jupiter shone his flashlight around. The room was small and whitewashed. The floor was not paved and the exposed ground was sandy. Close to the right wall was the pit that was just dug and next to it was a wooden box with metal fittings.

"There is it. They have not taken it away," Juve remarked. "It must be something unusual—something that in a normal house would immediately attract attention. I'd love to know what is in there..."

"Let's have a look. It may be a treasure," Pete said and crept closer to the box. "If it's one million dollars, we can take it and leave."

At that moment, Bob dashed into the room and hissed: "Someone is coming!"

They had to react quickly. Jupiter signalled to Pete and Bob to remain in the room as he quickly and quietly closed the door. Then they immediately switched off their flashlights.

They heard a key turn and the basement door was opened.

"Hello?" said a man's voice quite softly. "Matthew, is that you?"

All three of them held their breath.

"Hello?" asked Winston Granville again. This time it sounded clearly frightened, and he didn't wait for an answer at all, but closed the door back and turned the key.

The Three Investigators did not move until they were certain that Winston Granville could no longer hear them.

Then Jupiter whispered: "I guess the sleeping pill didn't work long enough..."

"Why didn't we say anything?" whispered Pete. "This was the best opportunity for us to tell him that his brother was digging up this thing in the basement!"

“What? And let Matthew Granville know that we were down here spying on him?” hissed Bob. “We might as well have walked in here earlier and helped them dig! Besides, what is the thing they dug up?”

“Would it be the great invention?” Pete asked. “Perhaps the two of them stole it.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Jupiter said excitedly and shone the flashlight at the box. “Let’s open it.”

Pete struggled with the lid of the box and finally managed to lift it up. Inside the box lay a dented, twisted, blackened orange metal box, on the sides of which the words ‘Do not open’ were visible.

“It’s a flight data recorder—the ‘black box’,” said Jupiter. “At least it used to be one. I watched a TV programme about it once.”

“Why a ‘black box’?” Pete remarked. “This box is orange.”

“A box that contains electronic components is commonly called a ‘black box’,” Jupe explained. “It is also possible that early flight recorders were black. The colour was changed to orange so that it is easier to find in an accident scene.”

“Why do you think he buried it here?” Bob wondered. “He could have just locked it up in a cupboard.”

“I think Matthew Granville wanted to make sure nobody would find it,” Jupiter surmised. “I suppose now he wants to remove it from here and disposing it elsewhere. He probably made a mistake having this thing dug up when we are around. It’s a good thing Bob woke up.”

“Now that we know what this is, I think we’d better get out of here.” Bob hissed.

They closed the lid and crept out of the room. Pete locked it back and the three of them made their way up the stairs. At the top, they listened carefully at the door for a while before Pete began to pick the lock.

After a minute, the basement door was opened and they came out. Pete locked the door back and they made their way slowly up the stairs.

Halfway up, they heard voices from the first floor. It was Winston Granville. “Now believe me! I heard noises. Someone is down there! I thought it was you!”

“Since I was lying peacefully in my bed and sleeping, I can hardly have been down there,” Matthew replied in a testy tone. “But please, if you think that—” He broke off when the light of his flashlight caught the three figures coming up the stairs. “Hey! Who is that? What—”

Jupiter interrupted him immediately. “Mr Granville! We heard a strange noise and came down to check it out!”

“Wh... what?” cried Winston Granville. “Is that you three? What are you doing downstairs at this time?”

“As investigators we follow up all unusual incidents,” said Jupiter. “The earthquake had woken us up and some time later, we heard a noise—”

“What noise?” Matthew Granville interrupted him sharply.

“We could not identify it,” said Jupiter. “We just came down to check it out, Mr Granville.”

“But—” Winston started again.

Matthew quickly interrupted him. “Winston, it’s late and I don’t feel like listening to their gibberish. They probably heard a rat in the pantry. Whatever it was, I’m going back to bed, and I advise you to do the same. And you—” he gave The Three Investigators a nasty look, “you do what Winston asked you to do tomorrow, and then you don’t show your face here again!”

“Agreed,” said Jupiter.

The Three Investigators continued up the stairs. At the corridor, the Granville brothers stepped aside to let them pass. Winston finally directed the beam of his flashlight downwards, and the light fell on something long and metallic—the barrel of a shotgun in Matthew Granville’s hand.

“You know what?” Bob said as they were back on top of their mattresses. “I don’t really feel safe and secure in this house. Where did Matthew Granville get a broken flight recorder?”

“And why did he bury it in the basement?” Pete added. “Tonight, of all nights, he dug it up when the house is crawling with investigators.”

“Good questions, fellas,” said Jupiter. “Not handing over the flight recorder from a crashed aircraft to the authorities should be a criminal offence. We should try to clarify what aircraft the device came from, what Matthew Granville’s relationship to it is and why he is doing all this behind his brother’s back. It was quite obvious that he didn’t want Winston to question us too closely about the noise in the basement. Something is going on here, fellas, but I have to admit that the connections in this case have not yet become clear to me.”

“You said that beautifully,” Bob praised and yawned. “I feel the same way, but at this hour, I can’t say it like that. Shall we go to bed?”

Jupiter pondered and finally nodded. “Yes, I guess there’s not much more we can do tonight.”

“That’s the best thing you’ve said today,” Pete said.

They slipped under the blankets and soon fell asleep.

7. A Simple Job

“You must think I’m a coward,” said Winston Granville the next morning at breakfast. “But there is something strange about this house. I’ve heard strange noises in the middle of the night before but Matthew doesn’t believe me. I’m almost glad you also heard noises last night—ha ha! This is finally proof that I’m not mad!”

“It’s just no use,” said Matthew, who just came in. “After all, the boys weren’t in the house before and couldn’t have caused the other noises you claim to have heard.”

“I don’t want to hear anything,” Winston said. “I want to sleep peacefully at night... but still I heard something!”

“There could have been rats,” said Matthew brusquely. “Damn critters, prowling around everywhere, sticking their rotten little sniffing noses into things that are none of their business.” He stared at The Three Investigators with such blatant hostility that they became uncomfortable. “Enjoying your breakfast, boys?”

“Yes, thank you,” Jupiter replied just as politely as before. Then he turned to Winston. “Today, we would like to speak to the cleaning lady Mrs Fields.”

“What’s the point?” asked Winston, irritated. “She has nothing to do with my invention!”

“Do you know that for certain, sir?” Jupiter asked.

“How? What?” Winston blushed. “Uh... yes. I mean, no! How should I know? But it’s obvious—what would a cleaning woman want with my invention?”

“Don’t underestimate the cleaners,” Jupiter said very seriously. “She could be a spy. You said you were surrounded by envious people and spies.”

“Uh... oh, yes,” Winston Granville quickly said. “But I would prefer you to focus on real suspects—that Frazier, for example. Let’s not make things more complicated than they are! Go to him, see if he has my invention and bring it back to me!”

“Shall we steal it from him?” Pete asked, irritated.

“Nonsense!” Winston ran red again. “You are not stealing if you bring me... uh... back my invention! It is mine! I had the basic idea and everything else.”

“But we would rather talk to him first,” said Jupiter. “After all, we don’t even know if he really has it. That’s just a hunch, is it?”

“Of course!” cried Winston. “What else? But if he’s got it, I want it back now, is that clear?”

“Certainly, sir. But we prefer our own methods. And those methods require careful—”

“I think you don’t understand something,” Matthew Granville interrupted him curtly. “You are not to question the cleaning lady or turn the whole house upside down. Your snooping around last night was enough for us. This is a private property, not a playground for teenagers. You’re supposed to bring the device back and get out. That is your job and nothing else. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” said Jupiter.

“So why don’t you leave Mrs Fields alone?” Matthew continued.

“Yes, sir, we’ll let her do their work in peace,” Jupiter replied.

Matthew Granville looked at him suspiciously, but Jupiter stuffed a huge piece of cheese in his mouth as if that was the end of the matter for him.

After breakfast, they packed their things and put them in the car. Mrs Fields had turned up in the meantime, but Matthew Granville had immediately taken her into the kitchen and swamped her with work. Her car was parked outside the house. It was a slightly dented blue Volvo. After Bob had noted down the number, they climbed into the Beetle and set off for Breston.

Their new acquaintance, petrol pump attendant Jim Mason, didn't mind them hanging around his place for a while and reducing his stock of iced drinks.

"Did you notice the earthquake last night?" he asked. "I tell you, a petrol station attendant in Breston is the most dangerous job in the world. Someday everything here will blow up in my face... maybe tomorrow, who knows?"

"Why should it be more dangerous here than on the coast?" Pete asked.

Mr Mason pointed his thumb at the mountain range rising to the west behind the town. "There! The San Andreas Fault runs less than five kilometres from here. There, the two continental plates scrub past each other. If it really crashes there, nothing is left here."

"I didn't realize we were so close here," Bob said.

"That is not important at the moment," Jupiter said impatiently. "Mr Mason, do you happen to know a Mr John Frazier here in Breston?"

"Yes, of course I know him," replied Mr Mason. "He's almost as bad as Winston Granville—only in a different way. He's always walking around with a face as if to say: 'Just you wait. I'm gonna get you sometime.' What do you want from him of all people? Does he have a niece who wants to say hello to him too?"

"A nephew," said Jupiter. "No, we just want to talk to him. Where does he live?"

"Drive down the street here. Turn left at the second corner. After a hundred metres, you'll see an ugly grey concrete block. That's where he lives."

"Thank you very much," Juve said. They said goodbye and set off.

After five minutes, they had found the house. It was in fact nothing more than a grey concrete block with some high, narrow windows. It stood in a very sparse garden where the sun was burning down mercilessly. As at Rose Hall, all windows were open.

Jupiter rang the doorbell. He had already figured out exactly what he wanted to ask Mr Frazier, but he didn't get around to it because the door remained closed. They rang a few more times, but there was no sound coming from the inside.

"Let's go around the house," Bob suggested.

They marched through the yellow, dried-up grass, discovered an empty swimming pool and a wrecked car rusting in the scorching sun, but they didn't see anybody. Instead, Pete suddenly pushed Jupiter and pointed to one of the windows. "Look!"

Through the open window, they looked directly at a very neatly arranged work table on which there was only one object—a grey box the size of a shoe box with some colourful switches and buttons.

"That must be it," whispered Bob. "Pretty careless to steal it and then leave it out in the open for everyone to see!"

"I don't think anyone has come to this garden at all in recent years," said Jupiter. "He probably thought it was safe enough. Most people would not even know that this is a valuable invention. But somehow, I don't like our mission at all! This is all going far too smoothly. Winston Granville practically sent us straight here. He must have known Frazier was the thief, but how could he be so sure?"

"Because he's crazy and paranoid?" Pete suggested.

“Possibly,” Jupe said. “But that’s not enough of an explanation.”

“So what do we do now?” Bob asked. “Are we gonna take this thing or not?”

“I’d rather talk to Frazier first,” Jupiter decided.

“And ask him if he stole Winston Granville’s invention?” Bob wondered.

“No, of course not,” Jupe replied. “But maybe he would have one or two hints that could help us... or he could make a mistake and give himself away...”

“But he’s not here.” Bob thought and then said: “I’ll do it. Give me a hand, Pete.”

“To do what?” Pete said in surprise.

“What do you think? We’ll get that thing, give it back to Mr Granville and then go home,” Bob said. Jupiter did not object.

“I don’t like this,” said Pete. He didn’t contradict any more and lifted Bob up the wall of the house.

Bob looked through the window. The room was probably a study, but a more orderly one than Bob had ever seen before. It looked almost unoccupied. In any case, there was no one there, and he quickly reached through the window and grabbed the device. “All right, I’ve got it.”

“I feel like a burglar,” grumbled Pete.

“In any case, Winston Granville will have to answer some questions for us,” Jupiter said sincerely. “Because I don’t like this either. Something is rotten here, fellas.” He took the device. “But before that, we’re going to the Breston newspaper archives. See if we can get something on Matthew Granville’s flight recorder.”

They stowed the grey device in the boot of the Beetle and made their way through the dusty, hot town to the office of the *Breston Desert News*.

When they arrived there, an elderly man was just about to lock the door from the outside. Reluctantly, he looked at the three boys. “Everything closed. At some point, a person has to have a weekend! Come back on Monday!”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, sir,” said Jupiter, “because we’re not from here. It is of fundamental importance that you grant us access to your archives.”

“So, is that it? Let me tell you something—it is also of fundamental importance that Russell Jackmore finally gets off work! What do you want in the archives?”

“We are looking for information about a plane that may have crashed here in the desert,” Jupiter said. “It is really very important.”

“So?” Mr Jackmore frowned. “Nothing has crashed here in the last year.”

“And before that?”

“Before that, yes. There is a US Air Force base located quite a bit further north. That is their training area. Every Wednesday and Friday they race their darn planes over our heads and make you go crazy.”

“When was there a plane crash?”

“The last crash was... let me think... yes, exactly, three years ago... and the one before that was... uh... fifteen years ago.” The subject seemed to interest him as he scratched his chin and postponed putting off his work for a few minutes. “Yes, I remember it well. Most of the time, the boys can save themselves, but in the crash fifteen years ago, one of the two pilots was killed. I had just started at the newspaper and was of course very keen to see the scene of the accident. The plane was scattered over half the desert, and the poor devil of a pilot probably was too. The other one had got out in time. He was detained and interrogated for months afterwards, but he couldn’t help either. And the strangest thing was that the plane’s flight recorder was never found. We all helped in the search, but the thing was not found.”

The Three Investigators were electrified. “Can you remember the names of the two pilots?” Pete asked excitedly.

“Boy, that was fifteen years ago! I can’t remember that today! The dead pilot was named Carr or Carruthers—something like that. I can’t remember the other guy’s name.”

“By any chance was his name Granville?” Pete asked.

“Granville?” Jackmore laughed. “Like our crazy inventor out there in the desert? What makes you think of that?”

Pete just shrugged his shoulders. “I just thought—”

“No, I don’t think his name was Granville... or was it? Oh, I really don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Surely it’s in the old newspapers,” Bob said.

“Yes, definitely. And if our entire archive hadn’t burned out last year, I could even pick out the newspapers for you. But so—no, sorry, guys.” He put the key in his pocket. “Was that what you wanted to know?”

“Not quite yet,” said Jupiter, “but you have helped us a lot. Thank you very much!”

“Not at all,” said Mr Jackmore, tapped at a non-existent hat in greeting and walked away.

The Three Investigators looked at each other. “Fellas,” said Jupiter, “I have the feeling that we are suddenly on the trail of something very strange. It might be worth digging in the archives of the *Los Angeles Times*. Let’s give Winston Granville his toy back and then we can go home.”

8. A Satisfied Client

Winston Granville was ecstatic when they presented him with the grey device.

“Yes! That’s it! My ‘Hearing Eye’! I can’t believe that this Frazier guy really... uh... had it! That thief! That scoundrel! He had the nerve to steal my invention!”

“Do you want to call the police now?” asked Jupiter.

“How? What? Oh, no, don’t bother. I have it back... again, I mean. Thanks, guys! Thanks a lot! How did you do it? Uh... was he actually... uh... at home?”

“No, he was not there,” replied Jupiter.

Winston laughed. “Excellent, excellent! Downright terrific! I could have done it myself. A nice little break-in, then, eh?”

“That is what we wanted to talk to you about,” said Jupiter. “How did you know Frazier was the thief? And how could you be so sure?”

“What?” Winston Granville paused, hesitated and blushed once again. “Nonsense! What are you talking about? I didn’t know! I just suspected it!”

“We don’t believe you, Mr Granville,” Jupe said.

“You don’t have to,” Matthew Granville intervened. “Anyway, you’ve done your work, and you don’t have to bother about anything else.”

“You know what?” Winston said. “You shall get a reward—I mean, just to reward your investigation abilities, of course—ha ha! Matthew, don’t you think we should pay the three of them a finder’s fee? A hundred dollars, how about that?”

“If you think so. I’ll get the money,” Matthew said.

“We don’t actually take money for our services,” said Jupiter.

“What?” cried Winston Granville. “You don’t know what you’ve done for me! Take this money as a contribution towards your expenses. Buy ice cream until you turn blue—ha ha! And now, you’re going home, huh? Well, have fun at the beach! And if you’ll excuse me, I have a lot to do!”

“Just a moment,” Jupiter said hastily. “I would like to know what the ‘Hearing Eye’ is. What does it do? What is it good for?”

“Yeah, you’d like to know that, wouldn’t you? Ha ha! I knew you were a smart one from the start—one to watch out for... but maybe you’re not so smart after all, huh?”

Matthew, who had just returned to the study, frowned and said sharply: “Shut up, Winston.”

Winston laughed, but actually said nothing more. Matthew pulled a hundred dollar note from his pocket and gave it to Jupiter. “Don’t worry—this one’s real on both sides.”

“Thank you,” said Jupiter.

“You’re welcome. I’ll walk you to the door. You drive safely back.”

They said goodbye to Winston Granville, but he only had eyes for the device and barely answered. So they left the study... and Matthew Granville closed the front door as soon as they went out.

“Nice contemporaries, really,” Pete said sarcastically. “Now what about this Mrs Fields? Do we look for her?”

“Why not?” said Jupiter. “Maybe she can tell us something about the flight recorder.”

They left Rose Hall and drove back to Breston. It was quite easy to find Mrs Fields's house, and she was home. However, they had no luck. She even opened the door for them—a pretty, typical Californian blonde with a friendly smile, but this smile disappeared immediately when Jupiter asked her about the Granville brothers.

"I don't talk about my employers," she said succinctly and coldly. "And certainly not about the Granvilles. Get out of here!"

"But we just want to know—" Jupiter started and broke off when Mrs Fields threw the door shut in his face.

He rang twice more, but she didn't answer.

"That was a flop across the board," said Bob on the way back to the Beetle.

"After all, we have that hundred dollars," said Pete. "It was worth it for that."

"That may be true, fellas," said Jupiter, "but I am still beginning to have a stupid feeling that we may have found something that we shouldn't have found, and that we have overlooked something else that is important."

"What?" Bob asked.

"Haven't you noticed? Matthew may have told Winston not to talk too much, but he made a slip of the tongue. He kept claiming that he didn't know that Winston had hired us. But when he gave us the money, he said this time the banknote was real. So how did he know about the double-sided printed hundred-dollar note that was in the shoe box?"

9. Rude Awakening

“I told you so,” Pete said two days later at Headquarters.

“Yeah, about a hundred times,” Bob said, annoyed. “That doesn’t make it better.”

Jupiter said nothing. He read for the third time the newspaper article that Bob had brought with him. It said:

Brazen Theft in Breston: Pioneering Invention Stolen

Last Saturday in Breston, an invention was stolen from the house of the renowned seismologist John C. Frazier, which the 46-year-old scientist wanted to present to interested experts at the annual seismologists’ conference in San Francisco next week.

This device is known as an Oculus Audiens or ‘Hearing Eye’. It can overcome the attenuation of radio waves below ground to allow precise observation and study of subterranean processes, in a way similar to what an X-ray machine does. This is particularly important for earthquake prediction.

According to police reports, the perpetrators had entered the garden of Professor Frazier’s house around noon and stole the ‘Hearing Eye’ from his study.

“This is a hard blow for me,” Professor Frazier told the Los Angeles Times.

“Fortunately, I still have the plans and records, but it will take a long time to assemble a new device.” He had been working on the ‘Hearing Eye’ for six years.

According to a petrol station attendant in Breston, the alleged perpetrators are three male youths aged between 16 and 18 who drove a small yellow car and had asked him about Professor Frazier’s house shortly before the crime. The editor-in-chief of the Breston Desert News, who had a brief conversation with the alleged perpetrators, provided a detailed description. Any police station will be happy to receive any relevant information.

“And this Professor Frazier is the real inventor of the ‘Hearing Eye’,” Bob said. “I have checked on the Internet. He is a very well-known seismologist and has been working in earthquake research for many years. He has published several books on the possibility of earthquake prediction.”

“This is really great,” Pete said angrily. “I feel like a complete idiot. We knew there was something wrong, and we went for it anyway! And I just don’t get it! Why did Winston Granville use us for his rotten plan? What is this all about?”

“We will find out,” Jupiter said decisively.

“And fast,” Bob said. “Before anybody takes note of the ‘small yellow car’ outside the gate.”

“Let me summarize,” said Jupiter. “Winston Granville uses us to retrieve an invention he didn’t even make. His brother Matthew doesn’t know anything about it, but he knows exactly about Winston’s methods by which he lured us in. And again, Winston is not supposed to know that Matthew and an unknown helper are hiding a flight recorder that belongs in the hands of the police or air traffic control. I can’t see how these events are connected yet. The only thing I’m pretty sure about is that it’s not Winston, but Matthew Granville who is

pulling the strings in this case. Now, let's see. Suppose one of you came to the crash site of a plane and found a flight recorder. What would you do with it?"

"I would turn it in to the police," Pete said.

"And for what?"

"So that the police can pass the device on to air traffic control or whoever, who can then use the data to reconstruct what happened in the aircraft before the crash," Bob said.

"And what reason could there be not to turn in the flight recorder?"

"None at all," Bob said. "It's just a mess. Especially if someone died in the crash."

"Couldn't there be a reason after all?" Jupiter asked persistently.

"What reason, for example?" Pete asked. "I can't think of any."

"What happens if you don't hand in the device or it is not found?"

"Then the data cannot be read," Bob said.

"And what reason could anyone want to do exactly that—that the data just don't get read?"

"Hmm..." Bob thought. "Cover-up? There's something on the recorder that he doesn't want it to be revealed?"

"But that must be something very bad," said Pete. "I mean—the plane crashes, a person dies! Who would be sick enough to withhold something that could help reconstruct the accident?"

"Someone who does not want the accident to be reconstructed exactly," Jupiter said slowly. "Someone who does not want the pilots' last conversations or the last records of the plane to be known."

They exchanged uncomfortable looks. A strange coldness seemed to spread in the overheated Headquarters.

"You know what," Pete said. "It might be interesting to find out who Matthew Granville is... or better yet, who he was 15 years ago and how he was involved in that plane crash."

The telephone rang. Jupiter picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking... Ah, Mr Andrews! Yes, Bob's here. Just a minute, I'll put you right through."

He passed the handset on to Bob, and switched on the loudspeaker. "Dad? Do you have the information?"

"Of course," sounded the voice of Mr Andrews from the loudspeaker. "Would you care to tell me why you're suddenly interested in plane crashes from the last century?"

"Uh... this is for school, Dad."

"Of course... as always. You learn so much from school that I wonder why it is always Jupiter who gets the good grades."

"Dad," Bob begged. "Can't you please just tell us what you found out?"

Mr Andrews laughed. "It's all right, I was just teasing you a little. Now, the plane was an Air Force A-7 Corsair II. There were two pilots on board. One was a Colin Carrington from Santa Clarita near Los Angeles, the other was a Matt Fairweather from West Virginia.

"Carrington was killed in the accident because his ejection seat was not working. Fairweather was not found until two days later, when he was wandering around in the desert completely exhausted. He must have suffered a terrible shock and could hardly remember the last few days. In fact, he could not say anything about the circumstances of the accident. He was taken to hospital for a few weeks and then flew again. Four years ago, he was discharged from military service. I could not find out what had become of him. He probably went back to West Virginia. So... does that help you?"

"Yes, Dad, thanks a lot! See you tonight!" Bob hung up and turned to Jupiter and Pete. "Is this true? Does it really help us? It wasn't Matthew Granville."

“But the first name is similar,” said Pete. “Matt is short for Matthew.”

“You mean he might have changed his name?” Bob asked.

“If he had something to hide, I could very well imagine that,” Pete said.

“Me too,” said Jupiter. “And if our Matthew Granville is really that Matt Fairweather, then he had something to hide, namely the flight recorder... for whatever reason.” He pinched his lower lip and thought. “I guess we’ll have no choice but to go back to Breston.”

“And we’ll get busted for burglary right away,” Bob said. “The petrol station attendant and this editor-in-chief would recognize us immediately! Probably the petrol pump attendant has also memorized my car number plate!”

“We have to take that risk. We won’t drive through the middle of the town, but around it. And then we’ll talk to Professor Frazier,” Jupiter decided.

“Then what?” Pete asked.

“Then,” Jupiter said grimly, “we’ll get that blasted ‘Hearing Eye’ back for him.”

10. Meeting the Real Inventor

The drive to Breston seemed to take forever, but when they finally arrived at Professor Frazier's house, they would have liked to postpone the visit a little longer. At last Jupiter took heart and rang the bell.

The man who opened the door for them was as short and chubby as the Granville brothers were tall and lean. He had a friendly moon face under a swath of semi-blond hair, wore a colourful patterned shirt and light-coloured shorts. Actually he looked quite friendly, but he looked angry.

"Yes?"

"Professor Frazier?" asked Jupiter.

"Yes, I am. What can I do for you? Who are you?"

"My name is Jupiter Jones. These are my colleagues, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. We are investigators. May I show you our card?"

Surprised, the professor accepted the card. "This is very interesting. Investigators? Aren't you a little young for that?"

"Absolutely not," said Jupiter, whose confidence returned when he blurted out the old familiar phrases. "We have done the Rocky Beach police many a good service and solved cases where more experienced people have failed."

"Interesting," repeated the professor. "And why are you here?"

"We hope that this will convince you of our sincerity. We would like to offer to help you recover the *Oculus Audiens*."

The round face of the professor was bitterly distorted. "That's nice of you boys, but I hardly think you can help me."

Jupiter took a deep breath. "I think so, sir. Because we already have a lead, so to speak. We know who stole the device from you."

The professor's eyebrows widened. "Oh really? Who did that?"

Jupiter cleared his throat. "We did."

Annoyed, the professor said: "Listen, I lack humour for jokes like that. What's this nonsense?"

"Unfortunately, it's not nonsense, sir. We have been instructed to... uh... steal the device from you."

"You've got a lot of nerve coming back here." His gaze grew even darker. "What do you want? Is this an extortion? Just so we're clear, because I don't play games!"

"No, it's not extortion, sir. This is a most unfortunate misunderstanding. May we come in and explain the whole thing to you?"

"This better be good or else I'll call the police!" he said as he stepped aside and let The Three Investigators in.

The house was functional and modern, more like an office than a home, and the living room into which the professor led his visitors looked like a company reception room, except for the six bookshelves on the walls. One could hardly imagine a greater contrast to the dark, worn cave of the Granvilles.

“Sit down,” Professor Frazier said tersely. He sat on the office chair at his desk and glanced at The Three Investigators with a pleading look. “Well? I’m listening.”

“The thing is,” said Jupiter as they sat down on the sofa, “we were hired by an inventor named Winston Granville to help him get the ‘Hearing Eye’ back. He claimed to be a polymath and had invented the device himself, but it was stolen from him... and he named you as a possible suspect.”

“Winston Granville accused me?” said Professor Frazier. “Well, that’s a bit strong. So you just came in here and stole the device from my study?”

Jupiter nodded and told him the whole story from the beginning, only the find in the Granvilles’ basement was left out. “And then we learned today that you, not Winston Granville, are the inventor, and that’s why we came here.”

“Well, well,” said Professor Frazier. “This story is so crazy, I might even believe it. And it even fits Granville—not so much Winston but his brother Matthew. Winston is paranoid and silly, but Matthew certainly has what it takes to dream up such a rotten trick.”

“So Winston Granville is not an inventor at all?” Bob asked. “But he had lots of strange things in his study, and the petrol station attendant said he was always coming up with ideas for... uh... beautifying the town.”

“Winston Granville couldn’t even invent a corkscrew!” said the professor scornfully. “Oh, of course he invents things all the time—for example, a solar-powered armchair, a rubber safety lock or an edible plate. But if he were asked to invent something useful, he would be as helpless as a cow knitting. He is no more a polymath than I am.”

“Then the ‘Hearing Eye’ is not his invention either,” Pete asked. “But he said—”

“Of course he would claim that it was his invention,” The professor snorted, “but he only had a very basic idea. A few years ago, he turned up at an inventors’ fair and bothered me with a whole bunch of half-baked ideas. Many of them did not even concern earthquake research. But something he said kept me busy and from that, I developed the ‘Hearing Eye’. So as far as this device is concerned, I am the inventor, not him. For example, many people complained about the limitations of candlelight, but it was Edison who invented the light bulb.”

“Did you know Winston Granville before?” Jupiter asked.

“No. I saw him for the first time at the fair. Too bad it wasn’t the last time.”

“Where did this fair take place?”

“In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.”

“Not in West Virginia?” Jupe asked.

“Young man,” said the professor in a voice that only Pete knew from his teachers, “I am not senile yet. I mean Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That is the only Pittsburgh I know. Maybe you should brush up on your geography a bit.”

Jupiter Jones, recognized genius and best geography student at school, did not bat an eyelid. “Yes, sir. I just wanted to be sure.”

“How did Winston Granville actually know what the device looked like,” Pete interjected to defuse the situation.

“He saw it three weeks ago when he visited me,” Frazier replied. “And I even told him that his idea from back then would not have left me alone until I started to build the device. By then he was already very angry and accused me of stealing from him. Of course I didn’t give a damn—such disputes are always going on. But now I am empty-handed.”

“Which brings me to the question I have been wanting to ask all along,” said Jupiter. “What is the ‘Hearing Eye’? I should have noticed that Winston Granville didn’t want to answer this question because he probably couldn’t.”

"It's some kind of radio," Frazier replied. "The basic principle is very simple—it sends out signals and uses the echoes to give an accurate picture of its surroundings. That is nothing new. What is new is that these very special rays that I have discovered can also penetrate the earth. It is like an X-ray machine for the Earth and is therefore of course extremely important for all research that has to do with the deeper layers of the earth. The device is of course still in the testing phase, but I had hoped to be able to present it to my colleagues shortly. With a more advanced version, it will one day be possible to measure the voltage within the earth. If the voltage increases, the probability that an earthquake will occur soon increases. And you know yourself how important that is for California in particular."

"And Winston Granville doesn't want you to succeed," Bob presumed.

"Probably," replied Frazier. "Yet he knows nothing about the operation of the device. He just wanted to know if it could be used to find mineral resources. He didn't even listen to me when I tried to explain to him that I had changed his original idea for my purposes. I didn't even get a chance to explain to him what the 'Hearing Eye' actually does."

"Hmm..." Jupiter thought. "Do you know anything about Matthew Granville?"

"Only that he enjoys playing a butler for his brother. I have only seen him two or three times... but I always had the impression that Matthew was not only considerably cleverer than his brother, but also very careful not to let Winston or anyone else notice. I have no idea why or for what reason he does it."

"But you said that you thought Matthew was capable of working with rotten tricks," Bob said. "What could he be up to? I mean, what does he get out of it?"

"I have no idea," said Professor Frazier. "Winston is easy to see through—he wants to be a brilliant inventor and yet he is just a poor bungler. I don't know what's going on in Matthew Granville's head and I don't want to know. And right now I'm only interested in one thing—I want my *Oculus Audiens* back." He stood up. "So we're going to Rose Hall."

"You want to go there?" Jupiter asked.

"Of course. I have a few things to say to Mr Granville... even if you won't like to hear them."

"And what about us?" asked Pete.

"You will come along, of course. And one of you will come in my car. I believe you're sorry for what you've done, but I'm not gonna let you walk away."

The Three Investigators exchanged glances, but it was clear to them that they could not really blame Frazier for the distrust.

Jupiter nodded. "I'll go with you, sir. We would also very much like to know what is going on as well. But I have one question—do you know anything about the crash of a military plane in this area fifteen years ago?"

The professor looked at him in amazement. "Excuse me? What's that got to do with my invention?"

"Perhaps nothing," said Jupiter. "Did you already live here at that time?"

"I have spent my whole life in Breston. Yeah, of course I know about that crash. It was back there." He pointed to the mountains to the west. "There was a huge black cloud. All of Breston went there, but, of course, nothing could be saved. I think one of the pilots died. What does this matter to you?"

"It's just something that just cropped up." Jupiter evaded answering the question directly. "One more thing—is it possible to use the 'Hearing Eye' to look for objects scattered on the ground or even underground?"

"It would be possible, perhaps with some modifications," the professor said. "If you are thinking about parts from the plane crash, there should be nothing left. In such accidents,

forensic investigations are very thorough. They don't miss anything... and now I'd like to go."

Shortly afterwards, they rumbled through the desert in a big cloud of dust towards Rose Hall. The big dark house stood like a foreign body in the glaring sunlight. The double door to one of the sheds was open, and in front of the house was a decrepit grey car.

"They seem to have visitors," Professor Frazier told Jupiter. "Very well, then, we shall just have to discuss the matter in front of witnesses. Perhaps it's just as well."

They got out and went to the door. Professor Frazier rang the doorbell energetically.

There was no sound from inside the house. The professor frowned and rang the bell again.

When there was still nothing happening, Pete said: "We could look through the window in the study."

"You've had practice at this, haven't you?" the professor said. "Let's have a look around."

They went around the house. The window was open, but inside, it looked different from before. Several of the strange objects and a whole lot of books had disappeared. The work chair had tipped over, and when Bob reached through the window and pulled out the coffee cup, the liquid inside had agglutinated into a stinking yellowish-brown mass. He put the mug back.

Jupiter went to the open shed. "It is a garage, but the car is gone. Could it be the one in front of the house?"

Professor Frazier shook his head. "No. The Granvilles have an antique pick-up truck. Apparently they are not here. But I don't understand..."

"I thought Matthew Granville was always around?" Pete said.

"Then whose grey car is that in front of the house?" Bob asked.

They returned to the car. It had seemed to have been parked here for a while—the bonnet, exposed to the sun's heat, was hot, but when Jupiter touched the shaded exhaust, it felt cool.

Professor Frazier went to the front door. This time he left his finger on the bell for half a minute. The shrill noise sounded loud through the silence of the desert.

"Wait a minute," Pete suddenly said. "I think I heard something. Some kind of muffled sound..."

They listened, but everything remained silent.

"That's it," Professor Frazier said sincerely. "The scoundrels are long gone. And so is my 'Hearing Eye'. Six years of work gone, just like that. I'll probably go to the police now and report the Granvilles."

"Sir," said Jupiter, "we are just as concerned as you are to get your invention back. May we try?"

"Yes," said Professor Frazier. "But honestly, I don't think there's any point. Listen. I believe you that you didn't know what was going on here, so I'm going to give you a chance. Find the Granvilles and give me back the *Oculus Audiens*! But if you haven't found out anything in three days, I want you to go with me to the police and give your statement. Well, now I'm off. Jupiter, shall I take you back to Breston?"

"No, thank you," said Jupiter. "We'll have a look around a bit more."

"Suit yourself!" The professor said, got back into his car and drove away. The Three Investigators were left alone.

When the distant hum of the engine had ceased, they heard a scream—quiet, muffled, and sounded like from underground.

“Help!”

11. The Prisoner at Rose Hall

“Quick!” cried Jupiter.

They ran around the house, Pete and Bob deftly climbed through the window to the study and pulled Jupiter along behind them with their combined strength. Then they ran into the dim, cool hallway of the big house.

“Hello?” cried Jupiter. “Who is there? Where are you?”

“Help!” it sounded muffled through the basement door. “Do not go away! Get me out of here!”

Pete jiggled at the door, but it was locked. “I’ll get my lock picks,” he said and ran to the front door.

“Help!” cried the man in the basement again.

Jupiter knocked at the door. “It will take a moment. Who are you? Mr Granville?”

“Of course not! If I catch Matthew Granville, I’ll wring his neck!”

Pete came back, handed out flashlights and pushed a lock pick into the key hole. Carefully he poked around in it. He had done this before to get out of the basement a few days ago. Soon, it clicked, and he turned the lock pick. Immediately afterwards the door was open.

The Three Investigators switched on their flashlights and descended the stairs.

In the back room with the pit, they saw a man lying on the ground with his hands and legs tied up with a rope. His short brown hair was streaked with sand.

In the light of the flashlights, the man squeezed his eyes shut. “Who are you? Help! Get me out of here!”

Now they recognized the voice—it was the man who had helped Matthew Granville dig up the flight recorder. He was about thirty years old, had a distinct beard shadow and wore a small silver plug in his left ear. Jupiter took a quick look around the room and saw that the wooden box with the flight recorder was gone.

Bob pulled out his pocket knife and cut the ropes and freed the man. Exhausted and dirty, he remained crouched on the ground, trying to move his fingers.

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely. “Thank you! Without you I would have perished miserably down here. No one ever comes here.”

“Who are you?” Jupiter asked as Pete sprinted up the stairs to bring the man a glass of water.

“Uh... you can call me Smithy,” the man said.

“Is that your real name?”

“Of course not.” Smithy pulled a humourless grin off his face.

“Who did this to you?” Jupe continued.

“Who could have done this?” said the man bitterly. “Matthew Granville, of course. By the way, who are you? No, wait.” He narrowed his eyes and looked closely at Jupiter and Bob. “I got it. You’re that gang of kids that Matthew hired to steal the device, right?”

Bob gasped for breath. Jupiter said: “From a certain point of view, your assumption is correct. However, we are actually investigators and we were hired by Winston Granville, not Matthew.”

“Winston? He can’t even hire a petrol station attendant to sell him petrol. Nah, boys, I don’t know what you’ve been told, but the head of this operation is Matthew, that sneaky rascal.”

“What happened?” Bob asked.

Smithy coughed. Pete came back with a glass of water and held it out to him. He took it, nodded gratefully and drank greedily. Then he put it on the ground and wiped his mouth. “That guy set me up—tricked me like a five-year-old kid! Told me to help him dig out some stuff...”

“The box,” said Jupiter. “It’s no longer here.”

“You know that?” Smithy asked. “How do you know that? Oh, never mind. Anyway, I did it, because I got paid for it. Anyway, he called me back yesterday to do more work, but I asked him for more money. He got angry and when I turned around, he knocked me down with a shovel and tied me up! When I came to, I screamed at him, but he just took the box and left. He said he will come back, but I don’t think that is any good for me. I know he wants to get rid of me once and for all.”

“Then you should go to the police,” Jupiter suggested.

Smithy laughed hoarsely. “Me? Boy, if I go to the police, they will change my primary residence for an indefinite period of time. I prefer to decide for myself when it’s time to go out every day. Nah, I’m happy to stay away from the police as long as possible.”

“But Matthew Granville is coming back for you! It’s in your own best interest to help us capture him,” Jupe insisted.

“Nah, thanks. The only capture I could help the police with would be my own, and I’m not too keen on that right now. Give me a hand up?” They stood up and pulled him up together. He was not very tall and rather slender, and they supported him until he could stand on his own again.

“Smithy,” Jupiter said, “he fooled us too, and now the police think we’re burglars.”

“Yes, that’s his speciality,” Smithy affirmed. “Matthew Granville is pulling the strings in the background. He always gets others to do his dirty work, and then when the police come, he plays the virtuous butler. He’ll deliver his own brother to the knife if he needs to.”

“Do you know what he is up to?” Pete asked.

Smithy moved his mouth. “Nah, I’m not gonna tell you. Thanks for saving me and all that, but I’m out. One night in this dump is enough for me. I happen to be very attached to my life and I don’t want to run into that guy again. And you better stay out of this too.”

“Not yet,” replied Jupiter. “Matthew Granville belongs behind bars.”

“All right.” The little man shrugged. “Do what you want—it’s your life. And if you want answers, Rose Hall can tell you anything you want to know.”

“This house?” Pete asked.

Smithy nodded.

“Smithy,” said Jupiter, “what do you know about the flight recorder that was in the box?”

The man flinched. “What? What flight recorder?”

“A burnt and dented device that was inside this box. Don’t bother denying it, we all saw it.”

“So you did...” mumbled Smithy. “When and how?”

“Not important. What do you know about it?”

“Nothing at all. I think it was buried in here in the basement for a long time. Last Friday night, Matthew called me and asked me to help him dig it up.”

“Why didn’t he do it himself?”

“How do I know? He was willing to pay me, and I want some money, so I agreed to do it.” Smithy grinned a little distorted.

“Where did he get the flight recorder?” Jupe continued to probe. “From the plane that crashed fifteen years ago? Why didn’t he turn it over to the police?”

“I don’t know anything about that. Now let me through. I want to get out of here.”

“Smithy, if you help us, we can testify for you in court,” Jupiter suggested.

“In court?” The man laughed. “What can you accuse me of? Matthew Granville tying me up here isn’t my crime, is it? I played tour guide a couple of times, that’s all. Now, boys, you don’t have to testify for me, ’cos I ain’t going to court. And if you want to keep me here, then give it a try, but first say goodbye to your teeth. I’m not gonna be seen here in this dump again!”

He took a step towards the door, and Pete stepped in his way, regretful but determined. Smithy stopped again. “Hey! What are you doing? Let me go, okay? I’m not disappearing completely. If the police are so anxious to find me, they will find me. I’m always around here. We don’t have to fight now, do we?”

Jupiter thought about it and finally said: “Alright, we’ll let you go.”

“What?” Smithy asked in surprise. “Really?”

Jupiter nodded. “I don’t know why, but I consider you to be largely honest. Let him pass, Pete.”

Pete lowered his fists and stepped aside.

“Thanks, lads,” said Smithy. “I won’t forget this.” He pushed past Pete, climbed the stairs with some effort, and was gone.

“So Rose Hall holds some clues,” mumbled Bob. “You know what? I’m going to the town records office. Breston must have a library. I’ll look around there and see if I can find anything about this house.”

“Good idea.” Jupiter nodded. “Just don’t get arrested! Pete and I take a closer look around here in the meantime. Maybe the Granvilles have left some clues after all.”

Bob drove off and they went on a search, constantly listening outside to see if the brothers should suddenly return.

Some of the doors were still locked, but Pete opened them with his lock picks. There was not much to see. Of the twelve rooms in the big house, only four were actually occupied—Winston Granville’s study, two bedrooms and a living room. All other rooms were empty—probably for decades. The unoccupied rooms had been hastily and lovelessly furnished, and all the furniture was as old and worn as if the Granvilles had found it in the basement and had only just dusted it before they put it up. The cupboards in the bedrooms were empty. When The Three Investigators entered the room where they had occupied the night they were there, they saw that the Granvilles had not even put away the mattresses.

In the whole house, there were neither pictures nor the slightest attempt at embellishment. There were neither personal objects nor any indication of the occupants. Only the kitchen was clean and meticulously tidy, and Winston’s study would have been almost cosy if not for the gaps in the bookshelves and all the stuff on the three tables.

“You know what?” said Pete as they got back into the hall. “I get the feeling they never intended to live here for very long... and they left as soon as they got the ‘Hearing Eye’ device.”

Jupiter nodded. “I wonder why Smithy thought the house would tell us something. Let’s go down to the basement again. Maybe we missed something.”

They searched the basement again but found nothing. Disappointed, they went back up the stairs and into Winston Granville’s study. Jupiter looked around—and flinched.

Something at Winston's desk caught his eye. He walked closer and recognized a row of letters written on the desk with a black felt-tip pen:

GDQJHU IRUW FDUULQJWRQ VHFUHW

"What's that?" Pete asked, looking over Juve's shoulder. "Caesar again?"

Jupiter converted the first characters and nodded. "This time without any flourishes—he must have been in a hurry."

"And what does the message say?"

Jupiter pulled a pen out of his pocket and wrote one letter after the other over the encrypted text:

DANGER FORT CARRINGTON SECRET

"Perhaps he didn't even have time to finish writing it," Jupiter said. "I think Winston Granville finally realized that his faith in his brother was not entirely justified."

"Danger Fort Carrington secret," read Pete. "So it's true—Matthew Granville did indeed have something to do with the dead pilot! But what? And what does 'secret' mean—a secret passage? But after searching the whole place thoroughly, we found nothing suspicious!"

"Let's take a look at the books the Granvilles left behind," Jupiter suggested. "If Winston did indeed try to give us a clue without his brother's knowledge, we might find something Matthew overlooked."

"But he couldn't have known we were coming back," Pete said.

"He could only hope that someone would come, just like Smithy down in the basement."

Pete shuddered at the thought of the bound man in the basement room. "But what is this Matthew up to? He's ruthless but I don't suppose that he would hurt his brother..."

"I don't know," said Jupiter. "I can't judge Matthew Granville at all... and I find that somewhat alarming."

"It scares me," Pete said emphatically. "We should go to the police!"

"And what shall we say? We stole Professor Frazier's invention, have you forgotten? Winston Granville's telephone message and letter to us are no proof at all. Carrington has been dead for fifteen years, the flight recorder is gone, and Smithy was not prepared to appear as a witness. We haven't got a thing on Winston Granville!"

"But Matthew Granville does—a shotgun!" Pete remarked.

Jupiter nodded. "That is what I am worried about. Hopefully Bob will come back soon!"

12. Rose Hill's History

It was almost dark when they heard the engine of Bob's Beetle through the open window. They threw the books down and ran outside.

"So?" cried Bob as he stepped out. "Did you find anything?"

"Possibly," Jupiter replied, led him into the study and showed him the text on the table.

Bob raised his brows. "Caesar again? This is getting to be a crazy idea. 'Danger Fort Carrington secret'." He frowned. "Perhaps a secret location?"

Jupiter nodded. "It's possible."

"And what kind of danger?" Bob wondered. "What does 'Fort Carrington' mean? Is this a place somewhere here? We know that Carrington is gone, that is, dead."

"I have no idea," Jupe said. "Did you find out anything?"

"You bet," Bob said. "And something even more beautiful than this news—a link that leads from Carrington straight to Matthew Granville." He dug out a photocopied map and his notes. "Around 1852, there was a small gold-mining town here called Rose Hill. Nearby was a military camp called Mountain Desert Fort which was supposed to protect the prospectors against Indian raids. However, the soldiers were more concerned with preventing shootings between prospectors.

"An earthquake in 1881 started a fire in Rose Hill, which reduced the town to rubble. After that, gold was hardly found and many prospectors moved away. Rose Hill was abandoned. However, in 1892, there was a rumour of another huge gold discovery in the area. A bunch of treasure hunters came here—not to dig, but to steal the gold from the finder—a certain Eliah Branson. He had bought this piece of land and built the house named 'Rose Hall' on it. He was shot dead in 1896. Allegedly he left a clue to find the gold, but it was never found. Finally, his heirs sold the house. It was renovated and resold several times. One of the buyers was Samuel Carrington from Santa Clarita, and his son, Colin Carrington, inherited the house on his father's death."

"No way!" cried Jupiter.

"Yes..." Bob continued. "After Colin's death, Rose Hall stood vacant for a few years until the Granvilles bought it two years ago and moved in."

"Gold," Pete said. "In any case, I like this as a motive better than the nonsense of the misunderstood universal genius! But how does it all fit together?"

"It fits—in a way that I absolutely don't like," Jupiter said gloomily. "I have a hypothesis based solely on the way in which Matthew Granville tried to rid himself of his helper Smithy.

"Let's assume that Matthew Granville is in fact Matt Fairweather, the Air Force pilot. Through the Air Force, he meets Colin Carrington and makes friends with him—so much so that Colin tells him that there is a clue to a hidden treasure in his house here... or maybe Colin has found the clue and tells his new friend.

"And then Colin is killed in a crash shortly afterwards, and Matt disappears for two days—remember? He was found 'wandering around in the desert' and the flight recorder, which might tell us about the last conversation between Colin and Matt, also disappears and reappears fifteen years later in the possession of Matthew Granville.

“Matthew Granville, who has since changed his name and bought the Carringtons’ house, and through circumstances we will not go into now, is in possession of a device which his brother suspects will enable him to locate objects underground... How does that sound?”

After a long pause, Bob said anxiously: “That sounds bad... very, very bad. Are you saying...” He stopped.

“I don’t want to judge too quickly,” said Jupiter. “But if my hypothesis is correct, I don’t think it can be ruled out that Matt Fairweather either caused or allowed his co-pilot to crash and die... and the flight recorder could prove it.”

“Why didn’t he destroy the thing?” Pete asked hoarsely.

“Pete, how are you going to destroy a device designed to survive a plane crash?” Juve argued.

“That’s true. But then this Matthew Granville could be a... a murderer!”

“He is definitely a criminal,” said Jupiter. “But apparently he doesn’t like to get his hands dirty himself. He only had to make sure, for example, that the ejection seat could not be triggered. He must have paid Smithy or someone else for some kind of dirty work, and he used Winston’s invention mania and paranoia to get into the possession of the ‘Hearing Eye’. And with it, he probably wants to search for the exact spot where the gold is hidden.”

“One way or another,” Pete said. “It’s gone... The invention is gone, and we have a problem. We should go to the police. Inspector Cotta will believe us!”

“Cotta has no jurisdiction here.” Jupiter frowned. “I just wonder where we should look for the Granville brothers and the gold now.”

“No,” Pete disagreed. “I don’t want to have anything to do with a murderer.”

“Me neither,” Bob said. “But we do have a few leads anyway. After my research, I simply went back to Selma Fields, the cleaning lady. At first, she didn’t want to talk to me, but then she said that she was so disgusted with both Granvilles that she didn’t really want to keep the job. In any case, she has seen Matthew Granville drive west several times in the last six weeks, into the mountains... and also every Tuesday evening, when Winston was annoying Breston Town Council to death with his crazy ideas.”

“What was he driving?” Pete asked. “They only had the one pick-up truck.”

“He was always picked up by someone in a grey car,” Bob said. “I suppose that was our friend Smithy. Mrs Fields doesn’t know him.”

“Why did he go six times?” Pete asked. “It sounds as if he doesn’t know exactly where the gold is after all!”

“You’re right, Pete.” Jupiter looked through the window across the desert to the distant mountains, which were only visible as black shadows against the dark blue sky. “Then perhaps Colin’s hint was incomplete or incomprehensible. Anyway, well done, Bob! If Matthew Granville was able to go up into the mountains, look for Branson’s gold and come back all within the duration of a council meeting, the place can’t be too far away. Let’s have a look around.”

13. The Earthquake

In order not to waste any more time and to take advantage of the coolness of the night, The Three Investigators decided to leave immediately. They borrowed some blankets from the Granvilles' house, filled up the water canisters and set off.

While Jupiter put their detective's case on his lap and examined the contents, Pete sat in the back seat of the Beetle and studied the map in the light of his flashlight. "If we drive exactly west, we will come to a road that leads into the mountains. There is a place called White Church. There we can ask if anyone has seen the Granvilles."

Bob nodded. "Hopefully the road is better there. You wouldn't think we're only three hours from Los Angeles. This area is as desolate, barren and deserted as the moon."

"But Joshua trees don't grow on the moon," said Jupiter, pointing to the right where a group of bizarre, cactus-like yucca palms rose from the desert ground.

Bob didn't pay attention because he had to drive around a huge pothole that the headlights had revealed out of the darkness at the last moment. The Beetle bumped and rumbled across the track, and several times The Three Investigators flinched when a stone was thrown from the tyres against the undercarriage of the car.

After a quarter of an hour, they reached the mountains. Like a snake of sand, the road wound its way up the hill, lined with prickly palms and boulders. A sign post told them the way to White Church.

"Fine," said Jupiter, and at that moment the earth shook.

It felt as if the whole mountain beneath them was moving. The Beetle took a leap into the air, the wheels spun like mad, then landed with a crash that horrified the three of them. A deep, earth-shattering rumble filled the air, and suddenly there was dust everywhere. The Beetle slipped to the side, the light of the headlights danced wildly over rocks and undergrowth. Bob braked and tried to counter-steer, but it seemed as if the whole slope had started to slip. Sand and rubble were in motion, simply dragging the little car along—sideways into the darkness towards a ravine.

"Get out," Jupiter cried, unbuckled his seatbelt, pushed open the passenger door and threw himself outside along with their detective's case.

Pete managed to fold the seat forward and wiggle past it, jumped out and rolled off to the rear. But Bob hesitated too long to leave his beloved car, and by the time he finally reached for the seatbelt it was too late. With a hideous screech, the car scraped over a boulder, reared up and then tilted down very slowly as if in slow motion.

Jupiter and Pete, struggling to stay on their feet between the sliding rocks and masses of sand, saw how the light from the Beetle's headlights penetrated the whirled up dust for a moment before going out.

The mountain trembled once more, as if in pain, and then came to rest. The crashing and rumbling of the rolling rocks died away, and the sand lay still under a huge cloud of dust. The whole earthquake had lasted barely a minute.

"Bob!" Pete yelled, ran, slipped and fell. Immediately, he picked himself up again and ran on. "Jupe! Quick!"

Jupiter had also fell down, but was just getting back on his feet. He still held the detective's case with both hands, but now he dropped it and stumbled after Pete. They stopped at the edge of the slope and stared down.

Ten metres below them, the Beetle stood upright on the slope, but buried in sand and debris up to the window on the driver's side. Pete and Jupiter immediately slid down the slope. When they arrived at the Beetle, they saw that the driver's door was stuck in the rubble. It was slightly open but not enough for Bob to get out. Inside, Bob was trying to crank down the window, but he couldn't as the door was badly warped.

"Bob!" cried Pete. "Thank goodness! Wait, we'll dig you out!"

Bob nodded and sank back into the driver's seat where he remained seated with his eyes closed.

Jupe and Pete removed the rubble away from the door with their hands. Finally, they cleared enough obstructions and managed to pull open the door. "Bob! Are you all right?"

"I think so," Bob replied hoarsely. "Man—I thought that was it."

Pete helped him get out of the car and Jupiter crawled into the car and pulled out one of the water canisters they had stacked behind the driver's seat. Miraculously, it wasn't broken. Jupiter passed it to Bob, who put it to his mouth with trembling hands and drank, and then handed it to Pete.

Only when they had all drank and Jupiter closed the canister did they dare to take a closer look at the Beetle. It was dented and scratched, the rear window shattered, and the two tyres on the right side of the car were only shreds of rubber.

"It's not so bad," Pete said encouragingly. "We'll get it fixed!"

"And you just need to pull it out, right?" Bob said. "I'd like to see that." Suddenly he started shaking, his legs gave way and he sat down on the hard ground.

"Shocking," Pete said immediately and made Bob lie down. Jupiter pulled the blankets out of the car and Pete helped him wrap Bob in them.

"We need to call for help," Jupe said. "Where's the mobile phone?"

Where was it? He had it in his pocket in the car earlier, but it was now gone. He didn't know exactly where he'd lost it. It must have fallen out when he jumped out of the slipping car. He frantically searched for it around him and backtracked along the way he came down, but he couldn't find it. It was probably covered with dust and sand, indistinguishable from a small stone. Eventually, he reached the top of the slope to the road—only that there was no road any more—it had disappeared under sand and rubble.

"I'll have to try the radio," Jupiter muttered to himself. He reached for the detective's case on the ground, took the radio out, and switched it on. While doing so, he looked out into the desert to the east, and what he saw there made his stomach churn.

A red glowing cloud hung above where Breston was.

"Oh no," whispered Jupiter in horror.

For the first time, he began to wonder if this had been the 'Big Bang'—the huge, devastating earthquake that all of California had been expecting for years. What did it look like on the coast now? And what did it look like in Rocky Beach? In California, there were smaller earthquakes almost every day which were not noticed at all, but Jupiter had never experienced one where cars could slide off the road like toys.

All emergency frequencies seemed to be under siege. He tried a few times, but couldn't get through. Instead, he suddenly heard something else—three long, three short and then again three long beeps, which repeated after a short pause. The sounds came out of the radio loud and clear, so the transmitter didn't seem very far away. It was an SOS—an urgent call for help.

“Hello? Hello? Can you hear me? Please state your position.”

But the only answer was the beeping of the SOS.

Jupiter slid down the slope again and came to a halt next to Pete. Bob had his eyes closed.

“Did you reach someone?” asked Pete.

“No. A fire broke out in Breston and no one heard me. Besides, the mobile phone is gone—we can’t even call home. Bob?”

“What is it?” Bob asked in a dull voice and opened his eyes.

“Do you think you can walk?”

“Where to?”

“To White Church. It’s only a kilometre away—we should be able to make it. I’m sure they can help us there.”

“I think I can walk. But I can’t get up the slope.”

“We will help you. Pete, do you still have your flashlight?”

“I do.” Pete switched on his flashlight, and the thin beam of light glided across the Beetle, which looked as dead as a hundred-year-old car in a ghost town. Pete quickly switched the flashlight off. “Come on, let me help you up.”

So they set out on their ascent. Pete supported Bob, and Jupiter dragged three water canisters, the radio, three blankets, the detective’s case and his own not inconsiderable weight. Ten metres wasn’t really all that much, but all three of them were wet with sweat when they reached the top. Bob sat down again for a while.

The red cloud was still glowing in the east, and they thought of Jim Mason, the petrol station attendant. Only two days ago, he had predicted a catastrophe, and now it was happening. Hopefully he had escaped with his skin intact!

After ten minutes, they went on. Pete lit the treacherous ground with his torch while supporting Bob. Jupiter dragged himself behind them like a pack mule. Every roll of a stone, every slide of sand scared them to death.

Would the earthquake start again? Would there be an aftershock—or something stronger?

Then Bob hesitantly said: “Jupe?”

“Yeah?”

“If the Granvilles were really digging somewhere here when the earthquake hit...”

“I’ve thought about that. I’ve picked up an SOS that may have come from the Granvilles, but until we know where the secret place is, there’s nothing we can do—not even if you’re feeling better.”

“I’m all right now,” Bob said. “We can’t leave them to their fate—not even that disgusting Matthew!”

“But we can’t dig them out with our hands either,” said Jupiter. “Our only chance now is to go to White Church.”

“I think I see it already!” cried Pete thirty steps further. “Up there—those are roofs, aren’t they?”

They strained their eyes to see something in the darkness. “At least nothing’s burning,” muttered Bob.

“They must have cut the power.” Jupiter took a good sip of water and passed the canister on to his friends. With new strength, they marched on.

But the closer they came to the small town, the more eerie they felt. It was much too quiet. They had expected to see people on the street, to hear fire and ambulance sirens, shouts and children’s cries, but apart from the crunch of their footsteps in the rubble, they heard nothing else.

They reached the main road. At least here not everything was destroyed. The street was intact except for a few cracks, and the buildings looked quite normal too—until they noticed that some houses were leaning so heavily against their neighbours as if they were about to collapse at any moment. A wooden shack at the entrance to the town had collapsed into a pile of firewood... and a thick, dark crack ran through the façade of a bank building.

They did not find a single car. No one was in the street, all the windows were dark, and every door they knocked on remained locked.

White Church was deserted.

“I don’t believe it,” cried Pete, and his voice echoed far through the silent night. “You can’t have that much bad luck!”

“I feel like this is a nightmare,” Bob said. “Fellas, I’m hurting all over... I need to sit down.” He squatted on the steps in front of a building and pressed his hand to his ribs.

“Jupe,” said Pete, “what happened here?”

Jupiter looked around and said: “Probably the residents were simply warned in time. White Church was evacuated, that’s all. They’ve taken refuge somewhere safe. If you live in the middle of the fault between two continental plates, it’s probably just routine. For us, of course, this is now a disadvantage... and also for the Granvilles—in case they are trapped or buried somewhere around here.”

Jupiter put his hands around his mouth like a funnel and shouted out loud: “Hello! Is anyone here? Hello! We need help!”

“Jupe!” Pete grabbed him by the arm. “Look up there! ... No, not in the sky—on the roof.”

Jupiter looked up and saw a shadowy figure scurrying across the roof of a house across the street and disappearing behind a chimney. Somewhere glass was clinking.

“What is that?” Pete gasped. “Surely there can’t be any ghosts here!”

“A looter,” Bob said quite soberly. “There is no better opportunity for looting than when the town has been evacuated. It’s not surprising.”

“A looter?” Pete’s initial horror turned into sheer outrage. “What a disgrace! I’ll get him!”

“No, Pete—wait! We must—” Jupiter broke off, because Pete was already sprinting across the street.

“Jupe, run after him!” cried Bob. “That guy might be armed!”

“I can’t leave you alone! You’re hurt and in shock!”

“Oh nonsense, I’m fine. Go on, go after Pete!”

Jupiter moaned and trotted. That’s when this case had started so harmlessly with letter games and riddles, and now he was chasing a looter in a deserted town, while two criminals were probably buried somewhere, fighting for their lives!

Bob was right—the whole thing turned into a nightmare—and a very exhausting one at that, as Jupiter usually likes to take a week or two to rest after physical exertion, such as unloading Uncle Titus’s pick-up truck. And now he had to dig sand and rocks around Bob’s Beetle, climb up a steep slope and walk a long distance with a heavy load—only to find an evacuated town. Something like that was enough to throw him on his sick bed. He certainly didn’t need any more chases. Nevertheless, he kept running, panting and panting, while Pete flew light-footedly across the street in front of him.

“Pete! Stop! Wait!”

Pete didn’t even think about it. He sprinted to the house where he had seen the figure on the roof and climbed up the fire escape like a weasel. When he was almost at the top, he saw

the figure leaping over to the next building. It was a man in jeans and a T-shirt. He landed on the neighbouring roof, but unluckily stumbled.

Pete heard Jupiter down below and called out: “Jupe! He’s on the other roof!” He himself climbed further up to the roof, turned around, took a run-up and jumped.

The looter was just getting back on his feet when Pete landed on him with all his weight and threw him down. They fought doggedly, and Pete soon realized that he didn’t stand a chance against his opponent. He was quite strong, agile as a cat and used some tricks that the Second Investigator would never have used out of sporting fairness. A kick between the legs made Pete see stars. He moaned and curled up. The looter pushed him away and came to his feet—only to be immediately knocked down again by Jupiter Jones—the human cannonball. The man fell over like a sack of flour and Jupiter sat down on him with all his weight. “Are you all right, Pete?”

“Fine,” moaned Pete.

“Very good.”

The looter moved and started fidgeting again and Jupiter said: “Forget it, Mister. You’re not going to get away—” He broke off. “Hey Pete! Look at this! We know this guy!”

Pete lifted himself up, still hurting. “What?” He faltered, looked more closely and shouted in disbelief: “Smithy!”

14. The Looter at White Church

The man squinted his eyes together and blinked suspiciously upwards. "What? Who are you? I do not know the name. Never heard it. It's not me!"

"Smithy," repeated Jupiter. "Of course you are! Don't you recognize us? We're the investigators. We rescued you from the basement of Rose Hall."

"Rose Hall?" Smithy lay still and stared at him. "Yes, I'll be damned! What are you doing here?"

"We need help," said Jupiter. "The earthquake threw our car down a ravine and our friend is injured. We had hoped to find help here."

"There's nothing here," Smithy said. "They all took off when the warning came."

"So there was a warning..." Jupe wondered. "Was it also for the coast?"

"Yes, of course there was a warning, but why for the coast? There was nothing there."

Jupiter was almost sick with relief. So nothing bad had happened at home in Rocky Beach. "Then it wasn't a strong earthquake?"

"Strong? Of course not! We have something like this every two or three years. Everyone leaves, has a nice evening, and then comes back to tear down the few destroyed sheds and build new ones. Even the police are gone, but I reckon they'll all be back here in an hour or two. Damn, I'll never get another opportunity like this again! Boys, let me go, okay?"

"So you can loot the houses here?" Pete said in disgust. "Out of the question! We'll hand you over to the police."

"Man, I must live on something," said Smithy. "After the Granville job didn't work out ___"

"We are here for the Granvilles," Jupiter interrupted him. "Does Matthew Granville own a radio?"

"Just the thing you stole for him. Look, I don't want to complain, but you're hurting my ribs right now. Could you maybe get off me?"

"No, because then you would run off immediately," Jupiter said. "How dumb do you think we are, Smithy?"

"Well, I thought I'd give it a try. Anyway, you got fooled by Matthew Granville, just like me," Smithy laughed, but it ended in a tortured wheeze. "Boy, you're really heavy!"

"Shall we now talk about my failed dietary attempts... or do you want to tell us what we want to know? In case it is not clear to you, Smithy, we fear that the Granvilles have been buried here somewhere. I picked up a distress call earlier."

"Is that my problem?"

"If you want me to get up, then yes."

"This is a vicious torture... in every sense," Smithy moaned. "So that chap has got himself buried, huh? Serves him right. He would have left me rotting in his basement! Anyway, why would the Granvilles be here? They have no business in White Church."

"Not in White Church," Jupe said. "Smithy, does the name Colin Carrington mean anything to you?"

Smithy blinked up to him. "No. Never heard of him."

"Matt Fairweather?"

“No.”

“Elijah Branson?”

“What? Are you going to list all the residents of the United States?”

“Where did you drive Matthew Granville every Tuesday for the last six weeks? We found a clue from Winston: ‘Danger Fort Carrington secret’. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Good old Winston,” mumbled Smithy. “I didn’t think he was so smart. All right—as long as you stop bruising my ribs. The names don’t mean a thing to me. I got Matthew Granville some maps and guided him through the mountains because he doesn’t know his way around here. He thinks our mountains are as dead as those over there in West Virginia—that’s where he’s from.”

“He’s from West Virginia?” In his mind, Jupiter ticked off another item on his list. “Do you know when he came here?”

“Nope. How should I know? I haven’t had a beer with him.”

“So eventually, where did the two of you go?” Jupe continued to probe.

“We went to an old gold mine. People around here call it a ‘fort’ because somebody once barricaded himself in there for weeks and shot at anybody who came near it. They got him after a week. The tunnel has been abandoned and collapsed for ages. I never would have gone in there, but Matthew has got it into his head to get something big out of it. If you ask me, that guy is as crazy as his brother—but at least he’s paying me good money to dig around in there for him.”

“So what have you dug up in there?” Pete asked.

“Nothing!” Smithy said. “We went there so many times, and he just directed me to dig at various spots... but yeah, we found nothing... at least not yet.”

“What about the flight recorder?” Jupe continued. “Do you know where he took it?”

“Oh, leave me alone with the flight recorder! I know nothing about it. He asked me to dig, so I just did it... that’s all to it.”

Jupiter frowned. “All right. Where is this old gold mine?”

“North of White Church. There used to be a road there, but it’s long gone. It’s all rubble and debris now. I never got through it with my car, but the pick-up truck—”

“Your car!” cried Jupiter. “Of course! Do you have your car here?”

“Yeah,” said Smithy slowly and reluctantly. “Why?”

“Smithy,” said Jupiter, “you must help us! Where did the residents of White Church evacuate to?”

“Breston probably.”

“Then you have to go to Breston,” Jupiter said. “Everyone is probably busy putting out the fire there, but go to the police and report that two men are missing and probably buried in this old gold mine.” He stood up, grabbed Smithy by the arm and started to pull him up.

“Hurry up!”

“And what are you going to do?” Smithy asked suspiciously.

“We will go there now and try to find them... if it’s not already too late.”

“So I’m supposed to go to Breston to the police all by myself? For a guy like Matthew Granville who played me out and tied me up?”

“And also for a guy like Winston Granville, who never hurt you.”

“Not me, but you. After all, Winston did fool you!”

“Don’t you worry about that, Smithy. Anyway, may I remind you that you owe us for saving you from the basement!” Jupiter was already on his way to the fire escape. “Come, Pete!”

“Did he get away from you,” asked Bob, who looked much better than he did half an hour ago. He was guarding the detective’s case, the water canisters and the blankets.

“No, we caught him,” Jupe said.

“And you let him go?”

“It was an old acquaintance,” explained Jupiter. “Smithy.”

“Smithy?” Bob wondered in bewilderment. “Who is—no! The guy we rescued at Rose Hall? He’s jumping over the roofs here?”

“That’s the one,” Pete confirmed.

“And why did you let him go this time?”

“Jupe sent him to Breston to report the Granvilles missing.” Pete shook his head. “If you ask me, we’ll never see him again. He’s long gone!”

“As long as he goes to the police first, I don’t care,” said Jupiter. “By the way, he said it was only a small earthquake. So everything is fine at home.”

“Good to hear that,” Bob said and lifted himself up. “Now I’d just like to call home and let them know that everything is fine with us... except my car. I don’t even want to know how much it’s going to cost...”

“Well, the phone’s gone. But I just had an idea... although rather late.” Jupiter pulled the radio out of his pocket and turned it on. “This is K6TTI. This is K6TTI. Come in.”

“I hear you, K6TTI,” a voice replied. “This is K6PBF. What is your posi—Oh, wait a minute! K6TTI? Jupiter Jones? Is that you?”

“Sure, Jeffrey,” replied Jupiter. “Why are you up in the middle of the night?”

“Just came home from a party,” the voice replied. “And you?”

“I am on my way to one. Listen, can you do me a favour? Please call my aunt and uncle and tell them that everything is fine with me. And the same with Pete’s and Bob’s parents.”

“Uh... what? Is that all you can think of at this hour and everything’s fine with you?”

“Yes,” said Jupiter. “So, are you going to do it?”

“If this is some kind of stupid joke, Jupe?”

“Not at all. Please call them right now.”

“Now? Am I tired of life? It’s almost four in the morning! Your aunt will rip my ears off!”

“Don’t worry,” said Jupiter. “Knowing my aunt, she would have been standing by the phone for a few hours. Thanks, Jeffrey! Over and out!”

“You’re crazy, Jupe,” Jeffrey said. “I’m not surprised. Over and out.” It clicked and the conversation ended.

“That would be done,” said Jupiter. “Then we can continue with our case. Bob, are you fit enough for another march through the mountains?”

“I’m fit to walk to the hospital,” Bob said. “Where do you want to go?”

“To the fort. Smithy said it was an old gold mine north of here. And he actually drove Matthew Granville there several times and went with him into the tunnel. So we can assume that the Granville brothers are there now—and probably in trouble.”

He switched the radio back to receive, but now the distress call was no longer audible. “Here we go. We’ll take the blankets and canisters with us... and a few shovels I saw behind one of those houses... and the detective’s case too, I’m not just gonna leave it here.”

“What do you want from it?” Bob asked.

Jupiter opened the case. “Everything we might need—this compass, for example.” He took out the device and closed the case. “I also have the walkie-talkies, even though I don’t

think they will be of much use to us in the tunnel... Maybe we can use them to target the SOS signal.”

“Why can we actually receive an SOS signal that is sent underground,” Pete asked as they marched off to get the shovels. “I thought that wasn’t possible?”

“Professor Frazier said something about newly discovered rays. I really need to talk to him about it later.”

“If there is a later,” Pete said gloomily. “Did you ever think that maybe another earthquake could come while we were stuck in the tunnel?”

“Yes, that is of course possible,” said Jupiter. “If you’d rather stay outside while Bob and I go in...”

“Oh, I’m going in too?” Bob said.

“All right, you guys stay out here, and I’ll go by myself.”

“You really care about the Granvilles, don’t you?” Bob asked.

“I don’t want to have to tell myself afterwards that I didn’t even try to save those two scoundrels,” Jupiter replied, “and at least bring Matthew Granville to justice.”

15. Trapped in a Tunnel

The Three Investigators marched on in silence. They were very exhausted and wanted nothing more than to fall into their beds at home and sleep for at least a week. It was one thing to go up against gangsters and criminals, but it was quite another to have to deal with forces that could not be defeated by cunningness, muscle power or special knowledge. The horror that the ground suddenly no longer supported them had taken a heavy toll on their limbs.

Jupiter took a look at his compass. "It should be here somewhere. Smithy said the road had been rubble and debris for a long time."

"Over there!" Pete said and pointed to an opening between two large boulders.

Now, the moon finally rose and cast its light on the mountains—bright enough to see the path even without flashlights. Under their feet, the gravel crunched and it seemed to them as if the whole world had died out and only the three of them were left.

"There's a sign!" cried Bob, and his voice echoed loudly through the night. He switched the flashlight back on and illuminated an ancient, weather-beaten wooden sign nailed to a pole, showing letters that, with some imagination, could be deciphered as: 'To the Fort'.

A hundred metres further on, they found the pick-up truck. It stood in the middle of the path, right in front of a tunnel entrance, sunk a little crookedly into the rubble. There were a few suitcases on the cargo area.

Jupiter climbed up and opened one of them. "Books and strange devices. This should belong to Winston Granville." He jumped down from the truck, walked forward and climbed into the cab for a moment. When he got out, he said: "All right. I'm going to look around in there now. You wait until the White Church people come and then—"

"Are you out of your mind?" Bob asked. "You don't think I'm going to let you go in there alone with those criminals! I'm going with you!"

"Me too," Pete said.

"What if there's an earthquake?"

Pete grinned somewhat tortured. "Then we'll pull you out—faster than you can run on your own. But do we really have to take all our things with us? At least leave the case out here!"

"We should have left it in the Beetle," said Bob.

"Then it would be completely gone afterwards." Jupiter hid the case behind a rock, switched on his flashlight and shone it into the tunnel entrance, which looked like a ripped black mouth. "Let's go."

Carefully they went inside. Normally they would not have given much thought to the stability of a gold-mining tunnel, but so soon after the earthquake, they did not trust the ground beneath their feet or the rocks above their heads. And the roughly hewn sandstone looked like lumpy flour in the glow of their flashlights. It was not very reassuring. The air was dusty and dry and smelled of sand. Thick wooden beams were jammed against the ceiling at regular intervals. They were connected with crossbeams, but in a strong earthquake they would shatter like toothpicks.

The tunnel led straight ahead and slightly downwards. Jupiter switched on the radio and they heard a steady static noise. "I don't like this, fellas," Jupe said and turned down the volume.

Pete frowned. "You mean in the end, the call didn't come from here at all, but from somewhere else?"

"That is one possibility. But I rather fear that the transmitter battery has gone. And if there is more than one passageway here, it will be difficult to find the Granvilles. Especially since Winston also hinted that it's a secret passage."

"Matthew must have left some marks," Bob said. "I can't imagine him walking through a maze of tunnels without marking his way back." He grinned. "Let's see if he was clever and drew a sign on the walls." He shone a light on the wall.

"Maybe at a junction," said Pete.

In fact, after about fifty metres, they came to a fork in the tunnel. Here it smelled faintly of alcohol and paint, and Bob spotted an arrow sprayed with black paint on one of the wooden beams in the left passageway. "Here!" He pulled his green chalk out of his pocket and drew a question mark over the arrow. "We'll also leave our mark—just in case."

They followed the left passageway further into the depths. It forked four more times, and each time they found a sprayed black arrow—until suddenly they were standing in front of a mountain of debris. Here the wooden beams had actually buckled away, and the entire tunnel ceiling had come down. Not even dynamite was able to blast its way through, as the explosion would probably bring down the entire remaining tunnel system.

Jupiter looked at his compass. "This passageway leads to the southeast. Let's go back to the last turn and go into the other passageway."

"But the black arrow points towards the debris!" said Pete.

"I know," Jupiter said grimly. "Maybe it was possible to go through here before the earthquake."

They turned around and marched in the opposite direction, passing a water canister around. But the other passageway also reached a dead end, only here it was not due to a collapse—the tunnel simply ended.

And suddenly, they heard the beeping from the radio again—three times short, three times long, three times short. Loud and clear, as if the transmitter was right behind the end of the tunnel.

"Hello?" cried Jupiter loudly. "Mr Granville?"

Muffled but they clearly heard a cry through the rock: "Run away, boys! This is a—"

"—Trap," said Matthew Granville behind them. "Exactly. Turn around nice and slow, you investigators, and put your hands up!"

They dropped blankets, flashlights and canisters and turned around. Matthew Granville stood there with his shotgun unlocked. He was dusty and dirty, and a bloody crack ran across his cheek. Only his sad doggy eyes remained unchanged.

"I thought you would follow Winston's lead," he said. "That's how real investigators work, isn't it? Running down every lead... straight to doom."

"You faked the SOS call?" Pete exclaimed. "That's a punishable offence!"

"Oh, really? How sorry I am. But don't worry, one of us is really in trouble. My brother has proven to be extremely useless to me."

"What have you done to him?" Bob asked angrily.

"Me? Nothing. Do you think I'm a monster? After all, he is my brother! I gave him a chance to develop his untapped talents. If he needs a good invention for once in his messed-up life, he needs it now."

"I'm gonna kill you, Matt!" yelled Winston through the rock face.

Matthew Granville did not pay any attention to him. "Do you have any last questions?"

"Absolutely," said Jupiter. "What do you intend to do? Are you going to shoot us?"

"That is not necessary. I will just leave you here in this tunnel. But don't worry, you will not starve or die of thirst. For the very near future, the excellent Professor Frazier has predicted a strong earthquake that will destroy the tunnel completely."

"And why do you want to kill us?" Jupiter asked.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I can imagine it," said Jupiter. "We have seen too much, haven't we? The flight recorder from the crashed Corsair fifteen years ago."

"Quite right."

"Am I correct in assuming that there is incriminating evidence there that could implicate you in the crash and death of Colin Carrington?"

"I see you did your homework well."

"So you really are Matt Fairweather?"

"I have always loathed that name," Matthew Granville said. "I got myself a new one and persuaded my brother to do the same." He wore a scornful grin on his face. "I always make sure that whatever my brother did was what I wanted, whether he knew it or not—except when he asked for your help, of all people."

"What is it all about?" Bob asked. "Is it really about Eliah Branson's gold?"

"Gold?" Matthew repeated scornfully. "Every idiot owns gold these days. No. Eliah Branson had found something that was considered useless grey dirt during the gold-digging days and often simply dumped away when it was found. Only after a long time did it become clear that this 'dirt' was worth far more than gold. I don't know what Branson expected from it, maybe he was just smarter, more foresighted or ignorant than the rest. In any case, he was hoarding the grey metal.

"When he died, it was of no use to anyone. It wasn't until many years later that Samuel Carrington figured out what this grey stuff was. He had it examined, found his assumption confirmed and told his son Colin."

"And he told you and signed his own death sentence," said Jupiter.

"He wanted to give it to the government," Matthew said calmly. "He was an imbecile."

"What is it about?" asked Pete. "What is this grey stuff?"

"Platinum," said Jupiter. "It should be worth a fortune. How much is it, Mr Granville?"

"About twenty kilos. The market value is about half a million dollars." The Three Investigators gasped for breath.

"How was Branson able to get twenty kilos of platinum together," Jupiter asked, dumbfounded.

"He seems to have devoted his whole life to it," Matthew replied. "Literally—when the diggers found out that his treasure was twenty kilos of dirty grey metal, they shot him."

"And why didn't you take this stuff a long time ago?" Bob asked. "Twenty kilos can be carried away without any problem!"

"Yes, if they can be found," Matthew said, looking at him with the deceptively sad doggy eyes. "Unfortunately, I haven't found it. Branson left a map with a mark on it. I paid that rascal to dig all over the place and found nothing. The stuff is gone. I have sacrificed my friend Colin Carrington for nothing. And I'm sure you can understand that I don't want to be hunted down for such a senseless cause. So I'm afraid I must now get you out of the way as well."

"Why don't you just throw that flight recorder into some abyss?" Bob asked in disgust.

"I've already done that. But it is of no use to me if you and my criminally less-gifted brother go to the police. So I better play it safe."

"Four murders instead of one? And you think you'll get away with it?"

"Five, I'm afraid," Matthew said with extreme sadness. "My poor brother is not getting out of here any more than you are."

"You are completely insane," cried Pete so loudly that it echoed in the tunnel. "You can't do this!"

"If you scream like that, everything here will probably collapse before the earthquake," Matthew said. "Turn around and go. If anyone tries to run away, I'll shoot the other two. And don't think I can't seriously wound you with this shotgun. For my purposes, it's perfectly adequate."

"Let's do as he says," Jupiter said and made no effort to hide his disgust from the man.

"Clever boy," Matthew praised but was unimpressed. "Go on!"

He drove them back through the tunnel, past markings and chalk question marks. The path seemed to lead to the left again and again, like in a spiral. Jupiter held his compass firmly in his hand, but did not dare to look at it to avoid drawing Matthew's attention.

Suddenly, Matthew said: "Stop."

They stopped. Before their feet was a hole in the ground. They could not see how deep it was.

"Leave the flashlights up here," Matthew said. "And then you jump in there. Winston is waiting for you."

"How deep is it?" asked Jupiter.

"You'll see. Go on!"

"Jupe, I'll go first," Pete said resolutely. "I can take a tumble better than you."

"Are you sure? I mean—" Jupe began.

"No discussions," hissed Matthew, who surprisingly seemed to suddenly lose his nerve. "I don't care who jumps first, just go!"

Pete sat down at the edge of the hole, pushed off and disappeared into the darkness. Jupiter and Bob stared after him and tried desperately to pierce the darkness with their eyes. What if it was a bottomless pit? What if it was—

"All right," his voice sounded right below them. "It's barely three metres."

"That's right," Matthew said. "And if you're not down in five seconds, I'll shoot!"

Since it sounded as if he meant it, Jupiter took heart, sat down and slid down into the black hole. Pete caught him and held him until he regained his balance, then they both supported Bob, who landed between them and emitted a cry of pain.

"What's wrong?" Pete asked anxiously.

"My ribs," Bob moaned. "I think I hurt myself during car slide."

Matthew Granville didn't wait until they had sorted themselves out. He shone his flashlight through the hole, and the three of them could see his sad face looking down. "Farewell, you investigators. If you hurry, you might be able to save Winston... whatever good that may do before the earthquake. And don't bother coming out through this hole as there will be enough rubble up here to bury you forever."

He pushed a board over the hole and The Three Investigators were in total darkness. They heard crashes and rumbles above them, and then it became silent.

16. A Devilishly Wicked Situation

Without flashlights, they groped their way through the darkness, blind as moles. With every crunch of sand, with every rolling stone, their blood froze. Would another earthquake come? Was it all over now? But the rock above them, around them and under them remained motionless, betraying nothing of the deadly danger from the depths.

The tunnel continued in a curve to the left. Suddenly they saw a glimmer of reddish light in front. After the deep darkness, it seemed disproportionately bright to them, but as they came closer, they realized it was only the light of a burning gas lamp in a small cave. It illuminated two shovels, a bucket, a coiled rope, a grey box with a few buttons and switches, and a break-off edge where the earthquake—or an earlier one—had torn the cave apart. Jupiter picked up the lamp and they carefully approached the edge.

Six metres below them, Winston Granville sat on a ledge and blinked upwards against the light. Below him, the light was lost in bottomless darkness.

“Mr Granville!” Pete exclaimed.

“Ah—is that you guys?” The voice of the inventor was as strong and carefree as ever. “This is a devilishly wicked situation I’ve got you into. I’m really very sorry. You couldn’t, by any chance, pull me up, could you?”

“We will try,” said Jupiter. He put down the lamp and threw one end of the rope down. Winston tied it around his chest, and The Three Investigators grabbed the rope and began to pull.

But Bob immediately let out another soft scream and grabbed his ribs. “Ow! I’m sorry, fellas, but I can’t pull.”

“All right,” said Jupiter. “Pete and I can do this.”

They pulled. And they were lucky that Winston was tall, but rather thin and even quite athletic. He supported himself with his legs and climbed up along the rocks until he could roll over the edge.

Pete untied the knot of the rope and unravelled it while he looked gloomily at the man who had brought all this upon them.

Winston Granville looked even more battered than his brother. He had a bloody scratch on his forehead, under which the skin turned blue and yellow. His colourful shirt was dusty and torn, his hands and knees scraped, his hair tousled. His trouser pockets were peculiarly bulged.

He remained lying down for a moment, then he sat up. “Thanks, boys. This isn’t exactly the most pleasant place down there.”

“How did you get down there?” Bob asked. “Did you fall?”

“Not at all,” said Winston. “Matthew sent me down. I was to check whether down there was the hiding place of that damned platinum. But by that time, I was already pretty angry with him and he with me. So when I called out that there was no platinum, he pulled the rope up and said that I could die down there.”

“Goodness,” muttered Pete. “Is that guy really your brother?”

“He is, yes. And I was actually always quite fond of him—until that story with poor Colin. I knew him too, you know. After that, Matt got stranger and stranger. I didn’t think

anything of it, but at some point, it got a bit spooky. He wasn't even interested in my inventions anymore!"

"Very strange," said Bob with a deadly serious face. "But can we put this off until later? I would very much like to get out of here before the earthquake comes!"

"What earthquake?" Winston Granville asked.

"That which Professor Frazier predicted would happen in the next few hours or days!" Bob cried.

"Did he really? Amazing. I always thought that earthquake forecasting was an extremely uncertain business. No, guys, don't worry about it. There's definitely no earthquake coming."

"Definitely no earthquake? In the middle of the San Andreas Fault," Pete said sarcastically.

"No offence, Mr Granville," said Bob, "but I think Professor Frazier understands more about earthquakes than you do."

"Quite possible," Winston said calmly. "I can't shine in every subject—ha ha! But how are we going to get out of here?"

"If there's no other way out except through that hole back there, then we're not getting out at all," Pete said. "Jupe, what are you doing there?"

Jupiter, kneeling beside the grey device and turning the switches, looked up. "I'm trying to find out how this thing works."

A loud rattling caused all four to flinch together and Jupiter quickly turned the volume down. "I think this was for the measurement of the earth's voltage."

"Thanks, I didn't need to know that!" cried Pete. "Jupe, how can you be so calm? Everything could collapse here at any moment!"

"Pete, you won't be able to stop the movement of the tectonic plates by panicking. I will try to send out a help signal with the *Oculus Audiens*. Meanwhile, you and Bob could check to see if there is another exit—something Matthew Granville missed. Take the lamp with you. I'm orienting myself here by the acoustic signals anyway."

"All right," Bob said and took the lamp. "Come on, Pete."

They took a shovel with them and followed the passage back to the hole through which they had slid in from. Bob held the lamp while Pete pressed the shovel against the wooden board. It did not move. Finally he gave up.

"There must be several tons of debris up there. Bob, what do we do if we can't get out of here?"

"Jupe will think of something," said Bob, hoping he sounded as reassuring as he pretended.

He didn't like the undertone of panic in Pete's voice at all, and he knew that he was not far from panic himself. In addition, his ribs were hurting and he still felt dazed by the shock of helplessly sliding towards an abyss in his car.

"Let's take a look at the rest of this tunnel," Bob said.

17. Smithy Brings Help

Jupiter listened to the low beeps of the *Oculus Audiens* and already regretted that he had given the lamp to Pete and Bob. Every now and then, a small display showed numbers that were of no use to him. If there were other unlit clues, he couldn't see them. He didn't understand how the device worked and felt time was running out. And it didn't help him that Winston Granville talked incessantly.

"I wasn't entirely stupid," said the universal genius in the darkness. "I mean, I'm sorry I dragged you into this, but the trick with Caesar and the package was good, wasn't it? At least it made you curious."

"Why did you call us of all people?" Jupiter listened to a scratching noise in the loudspeaker of the device and wondered if this was possibly an announcement of the earthquake. "As investigators, we're not exactly known in Breston or White Church."

"I had your card," Winston said, and Jupiter heard him chuckle. "Some time ago I was at an inventors' convention in New York, and there I met an older gentleman—Peck or Pock or something like that. He proudly told me about his grandson, who was in a detective agency in Rocky Beach, and gave me your business card. Are you actually that grandson?"

Jupiter sighed inaudibly. "No, that is Pete. The three of us are in this business. I suppose you engaged us to steal the 'Hearing Eye' for yourself."

"Not quite," Winston admitted. "By that time, Matthew had already begun to give me the creeps. I thought if I hired investigators and let them wander about Rose Hall, they might find something out... and you did find something."

"Hmm..." Jupiter mumbled and turned a switch. Nothing happened. "Did your brother bring the flight recorder here?"

"Yeah... He threw it over the edge when I was down there," Winston said. "Almost crushed my skull with it. Honestly, I don't even want to know what Colin said to him when he realized what he was about to do. That sort of thing just puts everyone to sleep. And it's been so long since..."

"Mr Granville," Jupiter said firmly. "Your brother is a criminal and I will bring him to justice—if it's the last thing I do!"

Winston Granville sighed deeply. "I know. You're right."

The earth trembled, something crunched very softly and Jupiter froze and tensed all his muscles... but nothing happened. Very slowly, he relaxed again.

The next moment, he backed off so violently that he sat down hard on the bottom of his trousers and his heartbeat thundered in his ears. The 'Hearing Eye' had finally reacted to his fumbling. He had done it!

"—Is nobody," said a voice from the loudspeaker. "You want to take me for a fool? Do you know that this is a criminal offence? I have more than enough to do over in Breston!"

"All right, Officer," a second voice answered impatiently. "All right, I'll get out of here. In any case, I have done my duty as a citizen—in other words, I have done what that fat boy asked me to do. This is the tunnel, and the boys are in there somewhere. Get your people over here and do whatever you want. Now I want to go to Florida and lie on the beach."

"Smithy," whispered Jupiter. Finding his voice again, he cried out: "Smithy!"

“What?” Smithy’s voice came back.

The policeman interrupted him harshly: “Who’s that?”

Jupiter took a deep breath. “My name is Jupiter Jones. Where are you? In front of the tunnel entrance at Fort Carrington?”

“Yes, indeed,” said the voice on the radio. “Are you in this tunnel?”

“Yes, sir. Matthew Granville locked up his brother, me and my two colleagues here in the tunnel, but that’s not important.”

He saw Bob and Pete come back with the lamp and stand there amazed, but continued unperturbed: “What is more important is that you catch him. His real name is Matt Fairweather, and he is responsible for the death of Colin Carrington in a plane crash here over the desert fifteen years ago. He had stolen and hidden the flight recorder from the wreckage, and earlier he threw it into an abyss here. Unfortunately we were too late.

“He was after Carrington’s platinum treasure, which he was trying to find using the ‘Hearing Eye’ stolen from Professor John Frazier. This is the device I am using now for radio communication. Did you hear everything? Watch out, he’s got a shotgun and—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” cried the policeman. “What are you talking about? Are you crazy? Oh, never mind—first we’ll get you out of there! There’s a major earthquake in this area, and it could go off again at any time!”

Again the rock crunched. Jupiter felt the cold sweat break out of him. “No! Go after Matthew Granville!”

“It’s no use, Jupiter,” said Winston. “Matthew is long gone!”

“No, he isn’t, because I tore the ignition cables out of the pick-up truck before we came into the tunnel. He must still be around!”

“There is indeed a pick-up truck here,” said the policeman. “All right. Johnson! Check the area for this Matthew Granville. They say he’s armed. The rest of you, come on.”

“Where are you, Jupiter?” Smithy asked in between.

“The path forks. Follow the right passageway. It probably ends at a pile of rubble. Under it is a board covering a hole. We’ll wait for you there.”

Winston Granville stood up and the four of them rushed back through the dusty, crunching darkness to the hole. There they stood, waiting and listening—and suddenly a short, sharp jolt went through the rocks, as if the mountain had shrugged its shoulder for a moment. A muffled, menacing rumble came from the cave, there was a crash, dust was trickling down the walls... and then it was silent again.

“Do I already have white hair?” Pete asked in a rough, scratchy voice.

Bob said nothing. Even Winston Granville was silent.

Above them someone shouted: “Here! Here it is! I found it!”

Stones rumbled and rolled to the side. One scratch and scrape, and the board disappeared. Two faces stared down at them—Smithy and a chubby policeman.

The policeman then dropped down a rope. “Get out,” said the policeman emphatically. “And fast.”

Five minutes later, all four of them had climbed up the rope. Jupe held on to the ‘Hearing Eye’ and all of them rushed towards the exit. The mountain lay there quietly again, but right now, nobody wanted to take a risk and remain inside the tunnel.

They stumbled out of the tunnel and saw that it had long since been daylight. The heat hit them like a blow, but the policeman didn’t give them time to rest and drove them to the waiting ambulance. Jupiter barely managed to get the detective’s case out of its hiding place. Smithy waved at them ironically, grinned and ran away. The ambulance door was slammed shut and it drove off.

“We are not actually hurt,” Jupiter said to the ambulance attendant. “Only Bob injured his ribs, when—”

“My Beetle!” Bob cried and suddenly he was sitting up straight. “We still have to get my car out of the rubble!”

“Later,” said the attendant. “Right now, you lie down.”

18. The Clash of the Titans

In the afternoon, Professor Frazier visited The Three Investigators at the hospital and picked up his 'Hearing Eye'.

"I want to thank you," he said. "You have not only brought back my invention, but you have probably also cleared up a very dark chapter in our town's history. We had long suspected that the flight recorder was stolen. It is a shame that Matthew Granville was able to destroy it after all. The records would certainly have been invaluable. Now it will be difficult to prove anything against him."

"Well, it's still possible for the authorities to retrieve it from the cave," Jupiter remarked, "if they think it is worthwhile to do so."

"I hope they catch Matthew Granville," said Pete. "That rascal can't be allowed to run around free for another day!"

"What is going to happen to his brother?" Bob asked.

"Winston? He didn't commit a crime, perhaps only an accessory. Anyway, it will be up to the court to decide. I think they're gonna let him out on bail for now."

"And Smithy?" Bob asked.

"Who?"

"Oh, nobody. Never mind."

"By the way, professor, hadn't you predicted a particularly strong earthquake?" Pete asked. "Not that I'm complaining, but your prediction was not quite correct."

Frazier nodded. "This time I was very happy to be wrong... but it proves that the earthquake forecast is still in its infancy. I think I'm on the right track with my 'Hearing Eye'. And at some point, the 'Big Bang' will come. The earlier we are prepared for it, the better."

"We wish you every success, professor," Bob said.

"Thanks. Now, I have to take my 'Hearing Eye' back and put it under lock and key," the professor said. "I'll meet you at the police station in about an hour."

The Three Investigators left the hospital, walked through Breston and looked at the buildings. They all seemed to have survived the earthquake well. Only the petrol station was burnt down. Jim Mason, the petrol station attendant, had been admitted to the hospital for a few minor burns and had met The Three Investigators there. Apart from Jim, no one in the town had been injured.

Finally, they reached the police station and entered. Winston Granville sat on a bench and waved when he saw The Three Investigators. They waved back briefly and a moment later, the four of them followed a policeman into a room to make their statement.

After about an hour, the men of the search party returned. One of them went to Winston Granville. "Mr Granville?"

Winston looked up. "Yeah?"

"Just to inform you that we have found your brother," the man said. "He was bitten by a rattlesnake and must have wandered around the desert in disorientation and shock for a while

before collapsing. We managed to get him to the hospital in time. Rattlesnake bites are rarely fatal, but if left untreated, it may result in severe medical problems or fatality.”

“I understand,” Winston Granville said and looked down thoughtfully for a while. “Poor Matthew! He always wanted to be rich but in the end he overdid it.”

He gave himself a jolt, got up and fished a lump of silvery-grey metal out of his pocket. “Here, boys, you can have this as compensation for all the trouble.”

Jupiter stared at the lump and turned pale. “Where... where did you get this?”

“From the cave, of course,” Winston said. “The stuff was exactly where Matthew thought it would be—although I didn’t tell him that. I saw at least fifty of these lumps and I grabbed a few before you pulled me up. Actually, I wanted to throw them at Matthew’s face when I see him again... but now I think I’ll give this to you.”

“How much is this worth, Juve?” Pete asked hoarsely.

“If twenty kilos are worth half a million dollars and there are about a hundred grams of pure platinum in this lump, then it should be around two thousand five hundred dollars,” Jupiter said slowly. “We don’t want it, Mr Granville, and we shouldn’t take it at all. Send it to Colin Carrington’s family. They should be the rightful owners.”

“Yes, I’ll do that,” Winston said and put the lump back in his pocket. “Thanks again for your help, boys! I think I will contact John Frazier soon and tell him how he can improve his *Oculus Audiens*. There are still a lot of weak points. And I also have some good new ideas for Breston Town Council—especially about securing their energy sources against earthquakes. I will have a lot to do. So long, boys!”

They looked at Winston Granville as he marched out of the police station—and ran straight into John Frazier’s arms. Immediately, they had a heated exchange of words.

“The meeting of two universal geniuses—the clash of the titans,” said Jupiter. “Actually, I would love to hear what the two of them have to say to each other.”

“Why don’t you join them and have a three-cornered fight?” Bob suggested.

“I prefer to go home now, get into bed with Aunt Mathilda’s cherry pie and sleep for a fortnight,” Jupiter replied and they had a good laugh.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Pete said. “We still have to arrange to get the Beetle out of the rubble!”